

Inspection report for NH6 Oughton Children's Centre

Local authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	366424
Inspection dates	30–31 March 2011
Reporting inspector	Jackie Cousins AI

Centre governance	Local authority
Centre leader	Wendy Sims and Diana Foley
Date of previous inspection	N/A
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Linked school if applicable	Oughton Primary and Nursery School 133323
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Early Days Playgroup 146754 and Smarty's Day Care 146737

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.

An inspection of the registered early years/childcare provision was carried out at the same time as the inspection of the centre under Section 3 of the Childcare Act 2006. The report of this inspection is available on our website www.ofsted.gov.uk.

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

The inspectors spoke with the head of centre, and held meetings with the manager of the children's centre, the early years teacher, headteacher of Offley Endowed Primary School, the Speech Therapist, an outreach worker, the managers of Early Days Playgroup and Smarty's Day Care, the extended schools coordinator, two health visitors, a group of parents and carers, several members of the advisory board and two representatives of the local authority. The inspectors observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

Oughton Children's Centre is situated in an area of significant disadvantage. Its area covers urban and rural areas, bringing a diverse range of families to the centre. The large majority of families who live in the surrounding area are from White British backgrounds. A minority of families are from Asian and African families, or from Western and Eastern European groups. A very few are at the early stages of learning to speak English. The area around the centre has high levels of unemployment, families receiving benefits and workless households.

The centre was designated in 2003 and the buildings occupied by it have been enlarged considerably over the years. Since then, it has operated as an integrated centre. In partnership with Early Days Playgroup and Smarty's Day Care, it provides the full 'core' offer, including early education and childcare. Most children enter the childcare facilities and early education with skills that are lower than those expected for their age. The centre operates in one main building and other activities take place on their bus and at various community venues within the centre's area. It is led by

the head of school and a centre manager. The manager is responsible for providing leadership for the development and strategic direction of the centre, as well as the day-to-day management. The advisory board comprises representatives from the local authority, local councillors, health providers, staff from the centre and a number of neighbourhood partners, including infant and primary schools.

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 users and the wider community

2

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

2

Main findings

Oughton Children’s Centre provides a good service and strong support for children and families. The head of centre, the manager and staff members ensure all users, whatever their background, are welcomed into the centre. One parent summed up their feelings about centre staff by saying, ‘The staff are amazing. I don’t know how they remember all our names, but they do.’ Users and their children enjoy many imaginative activities planned for them at the centre. Children and parents really like ‘Shake, Rattle and Roll’ sessions, where they learn to move rhythmically to music. They successfully adopt healthy lifestyles. Parents take part and learn much from sessions about how much fat is found in foods such as a burger and chips.

The centre’s success is rooted in the outstanding level of care, guidance and support it gives users. This exceptional feature means that parents and carers feel safe at the centre and say it is a secure environment for their children. Their confidence is won because safeguarding is given a high level of importance and good partnerships between staff and other agencies are used well to support them. Parents and carers very much value the way that their personal needs are met, as a result of the tremendous commitment of all staff. For example, one parent typically commented, ‘I’d have gone crazy if it had not been for the centre.’ In a recent survey, 100% of users were satisfied with the centre and all it offered. Evidence from case studies indicates that families have received very effectively coordinated support in times of crisis because of perceptive referrals made by staff. High-quality guidance means that many parents and carers learn about the best ways to manage their children’s behaviour. For example, a session led by the qualified teacher enabled parents and carers to discuss different strategies that they could use to develop positive ways of working together with their child.

Children from the surrounding area who attend the centre and are in the Early Years Foundation Stage make good gains in their personal, social and emotional development. They behave well at the centre. The crèche plans sessions effectively for children at different stages of development and this means that early years practice at the centre has been improved successfully and is good. Children are assessed carefully by staff. However, children's and adult users' achievements are not always recorded in enough detail. This limitation means that it is not easy for the centre to track the full amount of progress that children make, or easily evaluate its impact on all users.

Senior leaders and the advisory board are clear about the strengths and areas for development across the centre. This good understanding is reflected in a secure improvement plan and accurate self-evaluation. These factors, together with good provision and outcomes and coupled with much improvement, demonstrate the centre's good capacity for continued improvement. Important developments to provision have ensured that 'The Ladybird Toddler Group' now runs sessions regularly at the centre. The bus allows the centre to offer 'stay and play' sessions successfully in at least six local villages. The work of the qualified teacher has led to centre staff, childminders and local early years childcare settings benefiting from regular and knowledgeable support.

The centre meets its statutory responsibilities for the promotion of equality and diversity well. It has been particularly effective in supporting users who have children with additional needs. For example, the 'Angels Support Group' meets at the centre every week and enables parents and carers to explore different techniques of managing the behaviour of children whose needs are within the autistic spectrum, for example. Children develop their language skills successfully because the centre benefits from the support of a speech therapist every week in sessions such as 'Positive Beginnings'. Occasionally, opportunities are missed to celebrate the United Kingdom's multicultural society and, therefore, a few minority ethnic members of the local community are not encouraged to use the centre to the full.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Make sure that children's, parents' and carers' progress is always recorded in detail so the centre tracks the full amount of difference it makes to users' lives.
- Develop the ways that the centre celebrates the United Kingdom's multicultural society, so that even more users from minority ethnic groups make full use of the centre.

How good are outcomes for users?

2

Healthy lifestyles are promoted effectively at the centre. Users learn successfully

about the importance of eating fruit and vegetables every day because this information is promoted well at snack time. Children are encouraged to try healthy foods due to effective encouragement from staff. For example, one parent said her child had tried carrot sticks happily for the first time because the centre presented them as an attractive option. Adult users are given confidence to exercise regularly due to highly popular aerobics classes run at the centre. The children who go to holiday sessions on the bus and in local parks learn to enjoy and benefit from keeping fit because of good use of equipment and staff encouragement.

Senior leaders and all staff give a high priority to ensuring the safety of all users, including those who are most vulnerable. As a result, users' welfare inside and outside the centre is promoted well. One parent said, 'You feel safe leaving your child in the crèche because you are confident in the staff.' Courses are used well to develop users' awareness of safety. For example, in recent years a significant number of parents and carers have successfully taken first-aid courses for early-years children. External agencies report that the centre uses the Common Assessment Framework rigorously. Very small numbers of children are supported through this system or child protection plans because the centre works in partnership with other agencies successfully to support all children and their families. This ensures that fewer cases move on to this higher level of support. Vulnerable and looked after children and their families are supported sensitively. The centre knows the needs of families it works with really well. This factor, together with early identification and careful prevention, plays a key role in the centre's work to reduce harm to children.

Children are well prepared for the future. They are keen to come to the centre and achieve well. They create very strong relationships with staff, and have positive attitudes to learning because they are enthused and intrigued by interesting activities. For instance, they explore mouldable materials with much enjoyment and make unusual shapes out of dough. Children learn to sing and add actions to songs successfully because of the good use of staff expertise. They learn that pictures and text in books have meaning because resources in the toy library are used imaginatively to bring characters to life. Guidance from staff is used skilfully to encourage children's independence. Transfer arrangements to local schools are well established so that children feel confident about the move.

Adult users contribute their views thoughtfully. The manager of the centre regularly makes herself freely available and listens carefully to users' comments and ideas. In addition, parents and carers are regularly encouraged to evaluate the sessions that they have attended. The centre consistently takes positive action on this information to improve its services. For example, Thursday evening classes were established because parents and carers requested them. The centre has a good reputation in the local community. Community cohesion is promoted well, especially in integrating parents from different age groups and backgrounds. The centre recognises, however, that it does not yet work with high enough proportions of families from all local minority ethnic groups.

Parents and carers are provided with a good range of information and guidance regarding childcare options at the centre and in the local area to help gain paid employment. Financial advice has enabled parents to receive the extra benefits to which they are entitled. Users have undertaken business courses, which allowed them to feel more confident about becoming employed.

The extent to which children, including those from vulnerable groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles	2
The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	2
The extent to which all users 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 users contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	2
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents are developing economic stability and independence including access to training	2

How good is the provision?

2

The centre knows its users' needs well as a result of good assessments. Support for the most vulnerable families is very effective and they have access to the outstanding quality day care and Early Years Foundation Stage education. The senior leadership team, with representatives from a range of agencies, meets regularly to ensure services are being improved for users. Children's language development is given a high priority because accurate evaluation has identified this area as a weakness for a few children in this aspect of their learning. Parents and carers are encouraged effectively to develop children's writing skills because adult learning sessions are used astutely to explain the best way for a child to hold a pencil. A few parents and carers have improved their own key skills. For instance, they have successfully gained a Level 1 qualification in child development because of strong links with a local college. Such has been their success, that some adult users said they would like more accredited courses. Occasionally, displays do not celebrate the richness of multicultural society as fully as they should.

The centre provides a good range of in-house and outreach services and activities, matched well to the needs of the surrounding area. It is successful in engaging with hard-to-reach groups. 'Dads' Club' on Saturday mornings is popular and offers activity sessions, including sports and watching films. Thursday evening sessions ensure working parents can attend ante-natal classes. Messy-play sessions help children to enjoy handling a rich variety of materials in well-equipped areas. Young parents and carers regularly attend sessions at the centre. For example, they learn about how to be enterprising and raise money to resource their sessions by making

and selling greetings cards. The centre keeps good records of local participation rates and engagement in different activities offered and so it can show that the large majority of users attend activities regularly.

All parents who spoke to the inspectors were particularly positive about the centre and the effect that it is having on their families. They were extremely appreciative for the care and support they are offered by all staff. For example, one parent explained, the centre has 'lovely and approachable staff and great activities'. Outreach provision ensures targeted groups of users are supported thoughtfully. An above-average proportion of mothers who come to centre sessions continue to breast and bottle feed their children for at least six weeks due to the well-informed and positive encouragement offered by centre staff and healthcare experts.

The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users	2
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all users	2
The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of users and the wider community	2
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to users within the centre and the wider community	1

How effective are the leadership and management?

2

Governance arrangements are good, and lines of accountability are used well by all. Members of the advisory board are wholly committed to improving outcomes for children and their families in the local area and are well informed about the services offered. Improvement planning is secure. The centre has already identified that it does not always gather evidence fully to show what impact it has on users or record children's and adult users' achievements methodically. All relevant partners are thoroughly involved in the drive for improvement because of the high expectations and excellent level of dedication of the centre manager. As a result of effective management and good outcomes for users, value for money is good. Strong leadership is provided by senior leaders and at all levels. Staff are keen to improve the centre. On a day-to-day basis the centre runs efficiently. Resources are managed well and carefully targeted towards users with the greatest needs. Users' views are regularly sought and significantly influence services. The manager has developed careful systems and procedures to ensure that provision is integrated successfully.

Partnership working is a real strength of the centre's work. Staff share information astutely after they have gained users' permission to do so. Inter-agency working is really thriving and it carefully identifies those families and children who are at considerable risk. Protocols and practices for referrals are used extremely wisely by

staff. The centre’s child protection policy and guidelines are robust. All staff have been fully trained at the appropriate level in child protection procedures. Risk assessments are created effectively for inside and outside activities. The centre is well maintained and health and safety issues are dealt with swiftly. It keeps detailed records about staff which contain valuable information on, for example, their qualifications and references from previous employers. Records show that all staff working at the centre have been subject to an enhanced Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check.

The centre promotes equality and diversity and tackling discrimination well. Staff are greatly committed to encouraging the inclusion of all families from the surrounding areas. The centre gathers valuable information about the different groups and evaluates their engagement. Children and adult users with disabilities are well provided for, both in the physical accessibility of the building and by access to appropriate professional support. The centre thoughtfully develops children’s and parents’ awareness of who helps us in the community. This means that adult and younger users learn effectively about what the Fire Service does for us.

The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day to day management arrangements are clear and understood	2
The extent to which ambitious targets drive improvement, provision is integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community	2
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of users and the wider community	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 evaluation is used to shape and improve services and activities	2
The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services the centre has been commissioned to provide	2
The extent to which the centre supports and encourages the wider community 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 inspectors took into account the inspection findings for the linked provision at Oughton Primary and Nursery School which took place at the same time as the children's centre inspection. That inspection judged its overall effectiveness as good. Provision and outcomes at Oughton Primary and Nursery School for the Early Years Foundation Stage were judged to be outstanding. The inspectors also took into consideration the inspection outcomes for the linked provision at Early Days Playgroup Early Days Playgroup, which was judged outstanding.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the NH6 Oughton Children's Centre on 30-31 March 2011. We judged the centre as good overall.

Your children's centre is a good place for you and your children to come for support. Thank you for helping us to find out about your children's centre. We enjoyed having the opportunity of talking to some of you.

You and your children really like the centre. We heard you value sessions where your children explore a wide variety of materials and resources, as well as learn how to speak and communicate effectively. You all like trying healthy snacks, such as carrot sticks, because staff encourage you and your child to try them.

Your children make good progress in their learning and behave well at the centre. It helps to prepare your children successfully for the next stage of education. The toy library is well resourced and so, for example, you develop your child's observation skills by completing together the puzzles you have borrowed. You and your children learn effectively to keep yourself and your family safe whether you are at home or out and about.

You said that you and your children are cared for extremely positively by staff and inspection evidence confirmed your view. This means that you learn about how important it is to use positive comments with your children to help nurture their confidence. Several of you told us how very well staff guide you. You really value the parenting courses, which develop your skills in managing children's behaviour positively. The staff work closely with other agencies to make sure that you are put in touch with others who can give you the right help and support.

The centre welcomes people from all backgrounds and treats everyone equally and fairly. Your centre leader, manager and senior staff have good ideas about ways to improve the centre. They carry out regular surveys to find out what you are happy

with and where you are less pleased. The centre responds well to your requests and has given you, for example, access to extra sessions at times which suit you best.

We have asked the head of the centre, manager and senior staff to look at how they can make things even better. One of these recommendations is to record your achievements and those of your children in key areas of learning even more carefully than they do now. In this way, the centre can show how effective it has been in supporting you and your families. Also, the centre has been asked to celebrate a variety of festivals and cultures more often, in order to encourage more local people from different backgrounds to come to the centre regularly.

It was a real pleasure to meet you and your children. I hope you continue to flourish and enjoy your time at the Oughton Children's Centre.

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