

Inspection report for Sycamores Children's Centre

Local authority	Wakefield
Inspection number	384147
Inspection dates	30-31 May 2012
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Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
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Linked school if applicable	108178 Simpsons Lane Junior and Infant School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	EY339984 The Sycamore Children's Centre Day Care

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 co-located primary school was carried out at the same time as the inspection of the centre under Section 5 of the Education Act 2005. 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 held meetings with representatives of the local authority, with the centre leader, with partner professionals from other agencies and with members of staff. Discussions were held with parents. They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

Sycamores Children's Centre is located on the site of Simpson's Junior and Infant School. The centre is a phase one centre and was designated in 2006. It is on the boundary of the district with North Yorkshire. It has 972 children under five within its reach area. Of these, 304 live in the 10% most deprived areas. The remainder lives in the 30% most deprived areas. The centre is located within an area of housing known as the Warwick Estate, where approximately three quarters of the properties are made up of social housing. Unemployment rates in the area are high. Of the children under five years of age in the reach area, 35% live in households without paid employment or with low incomes. A similar proportion of families is in receipt of benefits. Almost all families are of White British heritage, although there is a gradual increase in families of Polish heritage. Educational attainment within the area is low, with just under half of the population aged between 16 and 64 years having no qualifications.

The governance of the centre changed in April 2011. Originally, it was governed by the co-located school. It is now governed by the local authority. Since it opened, there has been a high turnover of managers. This restricted the establishment of on-going partnership work

until relatively recently. In April 2010, the centre lost one third of its space to the school. This impacted on its ability to deliver services from the centre. As a result, the centre now operates more services through outreach work. The current centre manager took up her permanent post in September 2011, following an extended period as the temporary, part-time/full-time manager. A permanent staff team has been in place since September 2011.

Children generally enter childcare and early education with skills and knowledge well below those expected for their age. The Early Years Foundation Stage is delivered through activities and groups that operate in the centre. There is on-site childcare for children aged nought to three years run by the local authority. This provision is subject to its own inspection and the report can be viewed 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

Sycamores is a good children's centre. Staff provide effective services for young children and their families, particularly those whose circumstances make them vulnerable. Users routinely praise the centre with comments such as, 'it has transformed my family life'. They also say that their emotional well-being and subsequent self-confidence have improved. Attendance rates at the centre are good and increasing well. The whole staff team has a thorough understanding of the needs of each individual and family who use the centre.

The centre undertakes particularly good work in supporting other Early Years providers to improve outcomes for children by the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage. The centre's diminishing main site is used to its full capacity. As a result, outreach work is becoming increasingly important and is a strength. Parent support workers ensure that any family in need receives on-going support whatever their individual circumstances. Not all of these contacts are direct referrals from agencies or health professionals but are a result of tenacious networking by centre staff. Current figures show that one quarter of children who experienced early learning activities would not have done so if the centre had offered only centre-based programmes.

Outcomes for children and their families are mostly good. Effective strategies to increase participation rates, coupled with accurate analysis of data and self-evaluation, have led to increased participation rates by children and families at centre-based and outreach activities. However, too few male carers or teenage parents currently access services. Despite its chequered history of changes in leadership and the decreased accommodation, the community shows great confidence in the staff and the centre's local reputation goes from strength to strength. Those mothers who seek advice from the Little Angels breastfeeding support group are fulsome in their praise of the 24 hours' support line. However, breastfeeding rates within the reach area remain below average.

Good safeguarding arrangements ensure that staff are well trained to cope with a wide variety of circumstances. As a result, children and families are well protected in times of crisis and say that they feel safe at the centre. This was clearly evident during the inspection. Parents are also happy with the support that they receive support from the centre to make their homes safer places. Nonetheless, there is still a higher than average proportion of children who suffer accidental or non-accidental injuries and who have to visit hospital.

The centre's strong leadership and management seek the views of users and make effective use of these to shape future provision. Families say they feel valued and know that their views are taken into account. Leaders and staff are committed to further improving the provision and to building on its strengths, as reflected in some of the rapid improvements seen so far. The centre has good capacity for sustained improvement. The relatively new partnership board is highly supportive but does not always provide a broad enough level of challenge to the leadership in terms of the centre's performance.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Work with health partners to establish further strategies to promote breastfeeding and to decrease accidental and non-accidental injury rates to children across the reach area.
- Develop further strategies to increase engagement with male carers and teenage parents.
- Increase the involvement of the partnership board in improving the impact of the centre's work.

How good are outcomes for families?

2

Health visitors, midwives and other partners collaborate effectively with the centre to ensure that families receive the right information and support to meet their specific needs. Advice ranges across antenatal care, breastfeeding support, mental health issues and safety awareness. Families engage with the centre because staff are responsive to local needs. The

full programme of events is advertised across the reach area so that those who live a distance away can access outreach activities. Healthy lifestyles are promoted through 'Cook and Eat' sessions, physical fitness activities and immunisation programmes. Partnership work between breastfeeding support services and centre staff mean that mothers are able to access 24 hour guidance both in and out of hospital. Even so, the proportion of mothers initiating or sustaining breastfeeding is below average.

'Stay and Play' sessions are particularly well attended and provide a point of contact for many families. One user said of the centre, 'It's good for the children. We make friends and the children enjoy using the range of different games and activities.'

Children behave well and participate enthusiastically in all the activities on offer. Parents say that there are regular, good quality experiences for their children, whatever their individual need. This includes those children who are looked after or who are subject to child protection plans. Children engage enthusiastically in reading and singing activities. They clearly feel at ease, confident and safe in the centre. Staff are committed to the promotion of issues that relate to users' health and safety. Good quality outreach work targets parents who may need additional support and ensures that they attend courses such as first aid and home safety. This ensures a clear improvement in their safety. Although the rate of recorded accidental or non-accidental injuries to children is declining steadily, it is still above average. Almost all of these accidents are in relation to trips and falls that take place within the home.

Strong relationships mean that users and centre staff treat each other with respect. Users confirm that the centre has been a lifeline. One parent confirmed, 'It's given me freedom, something to do, being a volunteer.' The centre's teacher runs courses for parents on how to support and develop children's language and literacy skills. She models story-telling and singing and shows parents how to optimise conditions at home for effective learning and development. Parents respond well to opportunities to affect decision-making about the centre's work and governance through their contributions at 'Have Your Say' group sessions and also on the parents' brick wall where their suggestions are on display.

High quality support for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage makes a strong contribution to helping the proportion of children that achieve a good level of development to rise year on year. The figure is currently just below the national average. This represents at least good progress from generally well below expected starting points. There is an overall improving trend in narrowing the gap between the lowest achieving 20% in the Early Years Foundation Stage and the rest. Professional partnerships between the centre's teacher and other Early Years professionals support these improvements.

Users' skills develop as they become increasingly at ease in situations outside of the home. A few are now following on from attending centre-based activities to pursue academic studies and training for careers, such as social work or midwifery. Adults are signposted to partners such as the Jobcentre Plus who are sometimes able to help them to access training, as opportunities to find employment are currently scarce.

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

The centre is housed in a compact modern building that is used to capacity. Skilled reception staff provide a warm welcome to users. They also take pride in developing their own skills to best meet the needs of users and this helps parents to feel more at ease when they first arrive at the centre. In spite of diminishing space, the centre's strong leadership ensures that its services continue to meet the needs of an ever-increasing proportion of the reach area. This is often via outreach work which is very well established locally. Staff assess well the needs of families whose circumstances make them vulnerable and set up support programmes which are exactly tailored to their requirements. Users appreciate their sensitive approach and say that the staff are never judgemental as they compile a 'needs jigsaw' that documents each person's bespoke learning or support programme. 'It's like my second home', said one user. The centre is ever mindful of its target groups. However, despite concerted efforts and a variety of approaches, the centre has not been able to draw in sufficient numbers of male carers or teenage parents through the activities offered until now. The centre is, however, very clear about the need to engage more of these target groups. Staff are now beginning to encourage more to participate in universal services as concerted efforts over many months show they are unwilling to engage in activities aimed solely at them.

Staff promote learning and development well through a varied programme of activities such as joint parent and child sessions, regular local walks and trips out. Strong support by centre staff ensures that children make a smooth transition from the various child care settings into school. Outreach services are of good quality and many users consistently praise them. For instance, they talk about the unstinting support from family and parent support workers and how nothing is too much trouble. High quality intervention and support work by the centre teacher gives staff at other settings confidence and a zest to develop their practice. They receive tips on how to evaluate and improve their provision so that increasing numbers of children learn and develop well. Similarly, programmes that support children's early language skills through raising parents' skills in engaging in conversations with their children

and regularly reading to them have a strong impact. Parents devote regular time to reading to their children and say that they understand why it is so important.

There is good quality care, guidance and support for all users who access the centre or benefit from outreach services. The well-resourced community room and outdoor areas enable young children to access a wide range of developmental activities in a safe and secure environment. Staff take close account of the personal circumstances of users and provide good quality information, guidance and equipment to assure their safety at home. Nonetheless, incidents of accidental and deliberate injuries to children are still above average.

One parent summed up the views of many users with the observation, 'You can't beat these people. I recommend this centre to everyone,' as she discussed how the staff had broadened her horizons and supported her to provide a better life for her child who has special educational needs. Another parent commented, 'I feel very fortunate to have been referred here. I've really come out of my shell.'

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

New governance arrangements resulted in a newly-constituted partnership board last year. The centre's leadership has made sure that board membership is representative of a wide range of local services and also has effective and regular input from parents. However, the partnership board does not always hold the centre to account with regard to improving the impact of its work across the reach area.

Comprehensive safeguarding policies and procedures prioritise safety and security. Consistent practice follows centre guidelines and informs all that it does. All staff and volunteers are checked as to their suitability for working with adults and children. Users report that emotional and mental health issues are sensitively addressed. A wide range of individual case studies show how those families and users whose circumstances make them most vulnerable are well supported by the centre. Issues of domestic violence, alcohol abuse and depression are carefully dealt with and meticulously documented.

The centre has access to accurate data and uses these well in conjunction with information from the local authority and other partnership work. This informs accurate evaluation of the centre's successes and where its work could improve. The centre manager ensures that

targets are increasingly measurable. Partners who work alongside the centre have a good understanding of its key priorities. Continuity within leadership and management has reinvigorated partnership work which is strongly established. The central focus is to continue to improve outcomes for families, whatever their individual need, as has happened since the arrival of the current centre manager. Parents of disabled children and those with special educational needs are highly content with the service they receive. Day-to-day management is effective. The centre provides good value for money.

One parent commented that, 'The staff always get you the right help.' There is an inclusive approach adopted by staff to all that is provided at the centre as well as within outreach work. Despite some highly-focused work, a few target groups remain to engage fully in centre activities. Consequently, the promotion of equality and the tackling of discrimination is satisfactory overall.

All staff praise the opportunities they receive for professional development. They experience a range of good-quality training and support. The leadership eagerly empowers all staff and develops their skills in line with identified priorities highlighted by the wider community.

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	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	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

Findings from the co-ordinated inspection of Simpson's Lane Junior and Infant School were used to inform judgements during the inspection of the children's centre.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Sycamores Children's Centre on 30 and 31 May 2012. We judged the centre as good overall.

We enjoyed meeting so many of you and listening to your views. We also read many of your evaluations about the courses and services you access. These paint a very positive picture of what you experience each week at the centre. Staff place a high priority on helping all of your families to improve your future by learning new skills. For example, many of you thoroughly enjoy picking up ideas about how to play more effectively with your children or how to develop their reading skills. Some of you are learning how to cook healthy meals. Others now have the confidence and skills to be able to support more easily their children with special educational needs. As a result, you are meeting new challenges with increasing success. In particular, many of you are able to help your children to get off to a better start at school in terms of their language and personal skills.

We also found that obesity levels among young children are falling. However, despite some strong partnership work, breastfeeding rates in the centre's reach area are not high enough and we have asked the centre to work with other professionals to look for different ways to promote breastfeeding.

Many of you told us that you and your children feel safe at the centre and that you learn more about how to recognise and avoid dangers when out and about. It is reassuring to see that the centre makes careful checks on the safety measures you have at home and offers you equipment that is missing. Even so, too many children are still ending up at hospital with injuries as a result of trips and falls. We want the centre to work more closely with all parents to reduce further these recorded injuries.

All of you who met with us value greatly what the centre offers in terms of services and highly supportive relationships. You told us that you can talk to staff about any problems and know that they will, without fail, try to help you and will not judge you.

There is strong support for young children. In particular, they develop their communication and social skills well and settle quickly into full-time education.

The parents we spoke to told us that all the staff are very good at listening to your views about how well the centre meets your needs. Their comments, along with the evaluations you regularly complete, show that you are highly satisfied with all the centre offers, even though you would like more space. We also found out that you are able to let the

partnership board know of your views through the 'Have Your Say' group. We know that the partnership board is still quite new but we have asked its members to make sure they ask lots of questions at meetings about how well the centre is doing and how it could do even better. Without doubt, they would welcome any questions you may have.

The centre has done well to register so many of the families in the area. We have asked the staff to carry on finding new ways to encourage teenage parents and dads to join in with regular activities as they are proving more difficult to coax along to the centre.

We would like to thank all of you who came to the centre to speak to us. We are very grateful for your help.

We wish all centre users every success for the future.

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