

Inspection report for Next Steps Children's Centre

Local authority	Kent County Council
Inspection number	384026
Inspection dates	17–18 October 2012
Reporting inspector	Sheila Browning

Centre leader	Mary Fathers
Date of previous inspection	No previous inspection
Centre address	Kings Farm School Cedar Avenue Gravesend DA12 5J
Telephone number	01474 364533
Fax number	01474 338688
Email address	mary.fathers@kent.co.uk

Linked school if applicable	Kings Farm Primary School 118585
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.

Report published: October 2012



The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, work-based learning and skills training, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children's services, and inspects services for looked after children, safeguarding and child protection.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

You may reuse this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/, write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

This publication is available at www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/100080.

To receive regular email alerts about new publications, including survey reports and school inspection reports, please visit our website and go to 'Subscribe'.

Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.ofsted.gov.uk

No.100080

© Crown copyright 2011



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 additional inspector and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the district manager, senior leaders, the centre's front line workers, members of the advisory board and steering group, parent representatives and volunteers, a wide range of health professionals and agencies, and the qualified teachers who support the centre. They had formal and informal discussions with parents and users of the centre.

They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation, including the centre's action plan, self-evaluation form and safeguarding documents, key policies and data about users.

Information about the centre

Next Steps Children's Centre is based on a split site on the outskirts of Gravesend. It comprises two buildings just under a mile away from one another. There are a number of additional outreach locations running programmes, for example: The Young Active Parents programme for teenage parents, The Freedom and Imagine programmes for women at risk of domestic abuse and an Incredible Years parenting programme.

Next Steps is a phase one centre originally designated in December 2007 as a stand alone centre. The centre's reach areas consist of Singlewell, Whitehall and parts of Westcourt and Woodlands. The centre is now part of a family of seven children's centres serving the Gravesham locality. The centre provides the full core purpose with universal and targeted services, including: home visits, family support, parenting programmes, play and learning activities for children aged up to five years, health clinics, baby massage, adult learning, advice and guidance, early intervention speech and language support, breastfeeding support and smoking-cessation support. It works in partnership with professionals such as health visitors, midwives and those

providing child and adult learning activities and provides pre-school places for targeted two-year-old children.

The centre has undergone some significant staff changes over the past year, including three consecutive periods of interim management. There is currently no permanent centre manager. An advisory board oversees the governance of the seven centres. It is made up of representatives of the local authority, the various services that work with the centre and some parents.

There are currently 1,023 children aged under five living in the reach area. Of these, currently 91 children live within the top 7% of the most deprived areas nationally. The vast majority of children are of White British heritage. There is an increasing number of new ethnic minority groups of Asian and British Asian, Eastern European and Black African heritages attending the centre. Children's levels of skills and experiences when they enter the Early Years Foundation Stage are much lower than is typical for their age, especially in language development.

Over 28% of families in the area are in receipt of workless benefit: just over 4% receive incapacity benefits, 18% are lone parents and just over 3% are teenage parents. The main social housing estate, Christian Fields, is experiencing enormous changes with some properties being totally rebuilt. Private housing is being introduced into the area, increasing the numbers of families from a wider social mix. Some 400 homes will be added to the reach area in the near future.

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

Next Steps currently provides a satisfactory service to local families. It has been affected by several staff changes in key roles, including several part-time interim managers and vacancies in administrative posts. There is currently no permanent manager. This has meant that, though the satisfactory levels of provision have

largely been maintained, ongoing improvements to the centre have been slow and some momentum has been lost. Nevertheless, the centre ensures satisfactory outcomes for the majority of local families who access its services.

'It's like a home from home here, so supportive and we gain so much', is typical of the positive views of parents who use the centre. Both sites are bright and welcoming and parents say the staff are very helpful and friendly. Staff show a good knowledge of the families that use the centre and are committed to helping them improve their life chances. Parents are regularly guided towards outreach facilities and activities. Safeguarding, advice and guidance are good. One parent said, 'We know we are safe here.' The centre has some recorded evidence showing that once parents attend and work with the centre, it is having a positive impact on their own and their family's lives.

The centre makes effective use of information from the local authority and health partners and uses this well to identify and engage with vulnerable families. However, the information is not always accurate, which means that the centre cannot pinpoint all the families that would benefit from support. The centre is therefore not working to its best effect with some target groups in the reach area, for example, lone parents, dads, disabled families, and with those who have children with special educational needs.

In the recent past, the centre has not used information and feedback from those who use the centre rigorously to show the impact it is having. However, this is changing and information is now beginning to be recorded about which individuals attend activities and this information is beginning to be used more carefully to help shape some new services.

The work of the centre is helped well by good partnerships with health services, which result in good and improving health outcomes for children and families. Partnerships with local schools are still developing, partly because there have been so many staff changes. Nonetheless, the centre is able to show that it has helped to smooth children's moves to school. Recent data show that children's achievement in the reach area is rising and there is evidence that the centre has contributed to this. Resources within the centre are good and are shared across the seven linked centres.

Governance is satisfactory and improving. The advisory board is developing its role in terms of being better informed about the centre's work and is beginning to ask probing questions about the quality of what goes on in the centre. Two parents are members and the centre is working hard to encourage more to join. The aims and priorities that the centre sets itself to help it improve services, though focused on the needs of families that use the centre, are not challenging enough, particularly in relation to the needs of some target groups in the reach area. This is reflected in its satisfactory, rather than good capacity to improve.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Ensure that a permanent centre manager is appointed as soon as possible so that more challenging targets are identified and then met.
- Improve the accuracy of data so that the centre is better able to identify families and individuals who may be in need of its services.
- Ensure greater parental representation on the advisory board.

How good are outcomes for families?

3

The centre is welcoming and staff work hard to improve the outcomes for the families using the centre. This is seen in the increased confidence and skills of those using the services. Particularly successful is the way parents know how to improve their own and their family's health because of the centre's interventions.

The centre is proactive in promoting breastfeeding and numbers are rising as a result, as are the numbers attending ante- and post-natal classes. Breastfeeding 'buddy volunteers' and a weaning group help any mothers who need support. The two-year-old child development checks, recently restarted, mean that any problems, especially linked to speech and language delay, are picked up early. The National Childbirth Trust works effectively within the centre and provides additional courses during pregnancy. The work of the centre has also contributed successfully to local immunisation rates which are rising rapidly. Good support and counselling and courses for baby massage, stopping smoking and drug misuse have a beneficial effect on families' physical, mental, emotional, health and well-being. In its attempts to reduce obesity rates, the centre has run a number of well-attended courses on cooking healthy meals and healthy eating. A 'recipe of the month' is tasted and shared among adults and children in Stay and Play sessions. The centre provides a wealth of information on staying healthy, diet and exercise, which helps families to live healthier lives.

The arrangements for families to stay safe are good for those families in contact with the centre. Care is taken to ensure activities are well supervised and organised, with regular health and safety checks. Expectations of behaviour, responsibility and respect are clearly displayed and understood by users. Children and other users behave well. No racial incidents have occurred. Those subject to domestic violence are well supported. Parents are swiftly helped at times of crisis, including finding emergency refuge and support. The close working partnership with health services ensures well-integrated support, such as 'Team around the child', which results in children being well protected. The numbers subject to the Common Assessment Framework process are increasing and this is making a significant difference to the life chances of children and their families. Parenting programmes such as 'Bumps and bubbas' and Solihull parenting and Baby resuscitation, have helped to reduce the number of hospital accident and emergency admissions. Information through 'Chatter Matters', a ROSPA checklist and home visits by the fire service, contribute to

parents' greater awareness of home safety.

The Early Years Foundation Stage Profile scores show a significant increase in the number of children achieving 78+ points across the reach and the gap between the lowest performing 20% and the rest is narrowing. The centre can claim a reasonable contribution to this. For example, parenting courses such as 'Baby talk', 'Messy play', 'Moving and grooving' and 'Every child a talker' help most parents using the centre to be more actively involved in their child's learning. A few parents with English as an additional language have attended a basic English course to help improve their language skills.

The centre has struggled to get parents involved on the advisory board. However, there is now a small number of parents represented on the board. They have been involved with local authority representatives and senior leaders to discuss changes in courses and the use of termly themes in some activities. They have also carried out recent audits for the centre on subjects such as customer service, the quality of sessions and the new buggy park. Parents sit on interview panels for all levels of recruitment. In addition, parents' views are collected and suggestions taken up through informal discussion and feedback on activities. The popular Stay and Play session, for example, was split into two groups a result of parents' suggestion. Feedback and comments from parents were used to help inform the plans for summer services in 2012.

Outreach services through the Young Active Parents programme encourage teen parents to return to education when ready, raising their self-esteem and providing opportunities for positive lifestyle changes. Though numbers attending courses are rising, those completing courses are few. Effective partnerships are developed with those providing advice on housing, debt and financial management. Individuals are directed to JobCentre Plus, connexions, apprenticeships, education and training in basic skills, and vocational courses. Some have achieved Level 2 qualifications and a Level 3 qualification in breastfeeding. A few have become volunteers, for example becoming breast buddies and young parent volunteers, or have accessed paid employment.

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	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 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?

3

The centre provides a good range of services for users. However, the more limited engagement of some target groups restricts the impact of the centre's provision. Health visitors, family social workers, young parent coordinators, and the public health midwife are based in the centre and because they work so closely together they have good knowledge of the families using the services.

Centre services and special events provide both learning and enjoyment. For example, some 300 families attended events at the centre during the summer, celebrating the Jubilee and the Olympics, and these events successfully raised the profile of the centre's work in the community. The sessions that staff lead, from Stay and Play to Baby talk, provide enjoyable and purposeful learning experiences. Those attending a parenting programme said that they now understand the importance of talking to their children and use the activities from the centre at home, so increasing their awareness of child development.

The care, guidance and support provided have a positive impact on the well-being and confidence for those using the centre. Parents told inspectors how much the centre had helped them and their families to improve their lives. Staff are responsive to individuals' needs and offer good individual support and advice. Examples are a Dads' group run by a male childminder that offered male carers the opportunity to play and develop relationships with their children. There is also a small focus group to try and engage more parents from target families.

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	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	3

How effective are the leadership and management?

3

Leadership has been interrupted and changes in staffing have made it difficult to underpin the work of the centre and of the steering group. Nonetheless, during this time services have continued and staff morale has been maintained. Appropriate professional development and checks on the quality of the work of staff have

continued and recent help from the local authority to bring about increased responsibility at all levels is making a positive difference. However, although the highly skilled staff are enthusiastic and committed, without clearer direction and focus, the centre has lost some momentum in moving forward, particularly in evaluation and the setting of challenging targets and extending the centre's reach into the community. This has not been helped by shortcomings in the quality of data.

The advisory board is developing its understanding of its role, the centre's work and the quality and range of its provision. It is now trying hard to get more parents involved. The centre already takes parents' views into account using other means. Identifying particular groups who are not engaged well enough with the centre is a recognised priority. For example, the centre is now exploring short-term projects to attract more dads to use its services. Equally, few disabled children are currently registered or attend services but this is changing. More families are now being encouraged to use facilities, including a sensory room at another centre.

Language and literacy classes are provided for families from different ethnic backgrounds and children enjoy using the many books in the centre which are written in different languages. Parents can access information about services in a range of languages. There are strong links with the local Black African Forum. Staff are helpful, approachable and are good role models, promoting equality and diversity and everyone feels equally involved. Resources are of good quality.

Effective safeguarding arrangements, including recruitment checks and training of staff to work with children and risk assessments ensure families are safe within the centre. Partnerships and liaison with agencies and professionals ensure early support and joined up services for those in contact with the centre. This includes child protection and support for adults who are vulnerable.

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	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

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance *Complaining about inspections*, which is available from our website: www.ofsted.gov.uk. If you would like us to send you a copy of the guidance, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

Summary for centre users

We inspected the Next Steps Children’s Centre on 17–18 October 2012. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

Thank you to all of you who came to talk to us and share your views about your centre and the service it provides. We agree with you that the staff are very helpful and knowledgeable and work hard. The staff are very good at understanding your needs and help you to get good advice, support and the services that you need, including from a range of different sources. You told us how much you enjoy the sessions and activities that take place and how since attending you have grown in confidence. Many of you made positive comments about the difference the centre has made to you and your family’s lives. The staff at the centre work hard to help you and your families to stay healthy and safe.

We know that most of you and your children who begin courses such as parenting or ‘Waddle to toddle’ benefit from the different activities and learn such a lot about your child’s development and the importance of talking to them and learning through play. We agree that the courses are good quality, but unfortunately not enough families make use of the centre, especially lone parents, Dads and those disabled and with special educational needs.

We know how difficult it has been for the centre to continue moving forward without a permanent leader for such a long time. We have asked that one be appointed as soon as possible. We want the centre to have a clearer idea on how it can make things even better for all of you and to check that the services it provides are the ones that will help you most and are what you want. In this way we hope that some of the momentum that has been lost will be restored. To help with this we have asked the local authority to provide better quality data on the reach area so that the

centre's work can be better targeted. We have also asked the advisory board to try and get more parents involved so that you have an even greater say in how the centre is run.

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