

Inspecting your children's centre

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Introduction

Children's centres are intended to be a 'one stop shop' for children under five and their families.¹ They provide support for parents and help them to access:

- health services for children and their parents
- integrated childcare and early education
- information and advice about children's services, parenting support and a range of family support services
- training and advice so that parents are helped to gain skills and find work.

All the different organisations that offer these services through a children's centre need to work together to give the best support possible to all children and families in the community. This will help children, especially those who may be disadvantaged, get the best start in life.

Purpose of inspection

Ofsted has been asked by the Government to inspect all children's centres. Inspections check whether children's centres help families with young children to find out about and use the services they need.

Inspections check that centres:

- know their community and the types of services, activities and courses that families who live there need
- deliver the services most needed, to a high standard
- do all they can to help families use the services they need most, especially the families that find it hard to do so, making sure that no groups in the community have been overlooked

¹ These are known as Sure Start Children's Centres.

- have good partnerships with health services, employment services, adult training, childcare providers and other relevant services, and that they 'join up' the support that families need.

Inspectors use guidance called a 'handbook' to help them decide how good a centre is. You can find the handbook² on Ofsted's website.

How can centres prepare for inspection?

Centres can start by asking themselves the following questions and making sure they capture the answers in their self-evaluation process, whatever form that takes.

- Are we sure we have identified all local families with children under five, including any groups or individuals that may find it difficult to access services?
- Are we sure that we have identified the specific families living in the centre's area whose circumstances indicate they are likely to be most in need of support?
- How do we know what we are providing is right for this area?
- Are we taking the right steps to make sure families who do not use the centre are encouraged to use our services as well as the ones that do, and if not, what are we doing about it?
- How will we know we are successful with the services we provide – are we setting ourselves challenging but realistic targets and measuring whether we meet these?
- Are we involving everyone, including families with young children and other agencies in evaluating the impact of what we provide?
- What data and evidence do we have or need to support our evaluation of how effective we are?

Inspection arrangements

An inspection is carried out by a team of inspectors. The size of the team will depend on whether i) the centre works alone, ii) whether it shares some or all of its services but has its own leadership and management team, or iii) whether it shares one leadership and management team with other centres.

Where centres share some services in a locality but have their own leadership and management teams we try to inspect them at the same time, but write a separate report for each centre.

² *Children's centre inspection handbook* (130056), Ofsted 2013;
www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/130056.

Where centres share one leadership management team, we normally carry out one inspection and produce one report.

For most centres, inspectors are on site for between two and three days. We give a centre up to three days' notice that we are going to inspect.

Once we have let the centre know when we are coming, the lead inspector telephones the centre leader to talk about the plans for the inspection. The lead inspector may come to the centre the day before the inspection to talk to the centre leader and see some of the centre's documents.

Once notified of inspection, the centre leader will need to:

- think about who they want the inspectors to talk to, and make arrangements for key people to meet with inspectors
- alert centre staff, families and partner agencies that inspectors will be in the centre and may visit activities being run by the centre
- make available data, evaluations, case studies, policies and other documents that may be useful to the inspectors
- provide details of the services and activities offered by the centre during the days the inspection is being carried out.

Once the inspection starts, the inspectors will need somewhere to meet to exchange information. They will spend most of their time talking to people connected with the centre, including:

- parents and children
- managers of the centre's different services
- health visitors, family support workers, employment or training advisers
- members of the centre's advisory board.

They will look at services or activities on offer, but centres should not worry if inspectors do not see all the centre's activities and services. The inspectors will not make judgements about every activity or service. Instead inspectors will consider whether the activities and services are right for the community, how the centre finds out if they are right for the community, and whether they are making a positive difference to the young children and families using them.

If an inspector asks to talk to you

Inspectors will want to understand how the centre operates, whether people enjoy using the centre and the benefits they feel it brings, and whether they are asked by the centre's staff about how well the centre is doing.

If you think of something after you have talked with an inspector that you think is important do try and find them.

At the end of the inspection

The lead inspector will explain how well the centre is performing in a short meeting called a 'feedback session'. This will normally be with the centre's leader and senior management team, but may include other people such as the local authority's lead officer for children's centres. The feedback will identify the provisional inspection grades and the main things the centre does well and needs to improve.

After the inspection

The centre will receive an inspection report shortly after the inspection and will be asked to comment on its factual accuracy. The report will be published on Ofsted's website normally within 15 working days of the inspection.

The local authority must make sure:

- the report is given to everyone who needs to see it
- an action plan is written quickly and that it focuses on improvements that are needed
- the action plan is clearly displayed in the children's centre and other venues like the Family Information Service or local health centre.

Ofsted will reinspect all centres judged to be inadequate within 12 months of the inspection and will normally reinspect those that require improvement within two years. Other centres may not be inspected again for up to five years.

Language inspectors might use

Inspectors may use the following terminology and phrases.

'Early childhood services' provided or signposted by the centre and partners

Early childhood services are set out in legislation as being:

- childcare and early education for young children
- social services relating to young children, parents and prospective parents
- health services relating to young children, parents and prospective parents
- training and employment support from Jobcentre Plus or other employment or education services for parents or prospective parents
- the local authority's information, advice and assistance about services and facilities relevant to young children and their families.

Early Years Foundation Stage

This is a framework for delivering early education and childcare to children from birth until 31 August after their fifth birthday. Schools, childcare providers and childminders deliver the Early Years Foundation Stage.

Ofsted's evaluation schedule

This is an Ofsted term for the document that contains judgements inspectors make during an inspection. We publish an evaluation schedules for all our inspections.

Grades/grade descriptors

Inspectors look at three main areas before deciding how good a centre is. They use a four-point scale; outstanding; good; requires improvement; and inadequate. In order to decide which grade to give, inspectors use 'grade descriptors'. The grades and grade descriptors are published in the *Children's centre inspection handbook* available on our website.

Outcomes for children (and their families)

When inspectors talk of outcomes they mean ways in which children's development has improved and ways in which families' lives have improved. 'Outcomes' may include improvements to the health of families, ways in which families have been helped to keep children safe, ways in which children have been helped to be ready for school; ways in which parents have been helped to improve their parenting skills and employability.

Self-evaluation

Ofsted provides a form that centres can choose to use, to set out what the centre is providing, how it knows what it is doing is effective, and where it needs to change things that are not as good as they should be. Centres may choose not to use the Ofsted form, but must be able to talk with inspectors about their priorities, the steps they have taken to improve services and the difference these are making to children and families.

Target groups

These are families in a centre's community that a centre has identified it must work with. These families may not speak English as their main language or they may be families with children who have learning difficulties and disabilities.

Targeted services

These are services that are not available to everyone; they are for people who have specific needs. Such services might include parenting classes that help manage children's behaviour, or specialist help for families of children with learning difficulties and disabilities.

Universal services

These are the services provided by a children's centre that are open to all children and their families who need them. They might include antenatal care, breast feeding clinics, stay and play sessions, toddler groups and/or early years childcare.

Some more reading

If you are interested in learning more about Ofsted's role in inspecting children's centres there is more detailed information available on our website www.ofsted.gov.uk. This includes all the documents inspectors use when carrying out inspections.

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