

Inspecting your children's centre



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Inspecting your children's centre

Introduction

Children's centres are intended as a 'one stop shop' for children under five and their families.¹ They provide support for parents and help 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 to help parents gain skills and find work.

All the different organisations offering these services need to work together to offer the best support to all children and families in the community the centre serves. This will help children, especially those who may be disadvantaged in some way, get the best start in life.

Purpose of inspection

Ofsted has been asked by the Government to inspect all children's centres. Inspections are to check whether each children's centre is making good arrangements for families with young children to find out about and use the services they need to help their children.

Inspections will check that centres:

- know their community and the sorts of services, activities and courses families living there need
- offer those services, or give families advice and support on how they can use them
- do all they can to help families use those services they need most, especially the families that might find it hard to do so
- make sure that no groups of the community have been overlooked
- have partnerships with health partners, Jobcentre Plus, childcare providers and any other key services that join up the support families need.

¹ The law calls these Sure Start Children's Centres.

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.

- Are we sure we have identified all local families with children under five, including any groups or individuals that may find it more difficult to access services?
- 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 start to collect to support our evaluation of how effective we are?

Inspection arrangements

For most centres a team of two inspectors will carry out the inspection. It will take place over two days either in the centre or visiting other activities organised by the centre during that time.

We will give a centre three days notice that we are coming to inspect. Once we have let the centre know when we are coming, the lead inspector will telephone the centre leader to talk about the plans for the two days of the inspection. The lead inspector may decide to come to the centre the day before the inspection to see some of the centre's documents, such as the centre's self-evaluation form. These documents help inspectors to decide what they need to check during the inspection and who they need to talk to. Coming early gives the lead inspector more time to talk to the centre leader about the inspection so that they are well prepared.



The centre leader will need to:

- think about who they want the inspectors to talk to, guided by the discussion with the lead inspector
- arrange for key people to meet with inspectors during the inspection
- alert centre staff, families and partner agencies that inspectors will be in the centre and may visit activities being run by the centre during the inspection
- consider the data, evaluations, case studies, policies and other documents that they want the inspectors to see
- provide details of the services and activities available for the inspectors to see during the days of the inspection.



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

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

They will look at services or activities on offer, but centres should not worry if inspectors have not seen all the centre's activities. The inspection will not make judgements about each activity or service. Instead inspectors consider if the activities are the right ones for the community, how the centre knows this, and whether they are making a difference to the young children and families using them.

If an inspector asks to talk to you

Please do not worry. Inspectors do not ask trick questions and are not trying to catch you out. Inspectors want to understand how the centre runs, whether people enjoy using the centre, whether the centre is making a difference, and whether those running the centre ask parents and children and other service providers about how well they are doing.

If the inspector asks something you do not understand, then ask them what they mean. Sometimes inspectors use language that is very common to them but they forget not everyone is an inspector. We have given some explanations below.

If you do not know the answer, please do say so. It is better to do this than to try and tell the inspector what you think they want to hear. If you think of something after the meeting that you think is important for the inspectors to hear or see, do try and find them to tell them what this is. Many people do think of things afterwards that would be useful for inspectors.

At the end of the inspection

The lead inspector will tell the centre how well they have done in a short meeting called a 'feedback session'. This will normally be with the centre head and senior management team. It can include other people such as the local authority lead person for children's centres. The feedback will give the provisional inspection grade (one of four grades: outstanding; good; satisfactory; or inadequate) and the main things the centre does well and needs to improve.



After the inspection

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

The local authority must make sure:

- the report is given to everyone who needs to see it
- it arranges for an action plan to be written to make the suggested improvements in the report
- the action plan is clearly displayed in the children's centre itself and in other suitable venues such as the Family Information Service or local health centre.

We will reinspect all centres judged as inadequate within 12 months of the first inspection. Other centres may go for up to five years before they are inspected again.

Language an inspector might use Early childhood services

These are set out in law as:

- 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 for parents or prospective parents
- the local authority's information, advice and assistance service relating to childcare and other services and facilities relevant to young children and their families.

Early Years Foundation Stage

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

Evaluation schedule

This is an Ofsted term for the judgements inspectors make during an inspection. We publish our Evaluation Schedules for all our inspections, usually in a document that sets out the things inspectors look for in a particular area such as leadership and management; and how the inspector awards the grade for that area.

Grades/grade descriptors

Each area an inspector looks at during an inspection is given an inspection grade. These are on a four-point scale of outstanding; good; satisfactory; and inadequate. To decide on which grade to give, inspectors use 'grade descriptors' that describe what a centre that was outstanding, good, and so on, would look like. The grades and grade descriptors are published in the Evaluation Schedule.

National indicator set

This is a set of measures that the Government uses to see how well local authorities are doing. It covers services delivered by local authorities alone and those delivered in partnership with other organisations like the National Health Service. Children's centres and the services they provide contribute to a number of these indicators. One example is National Indicator 53 which relates to the number of mothers breastfeeding at six to eight weeks from birth.

Outcomes for children (and their families)

The five things the Government says are essential for all children: being healthy; staying safe; enjoying and achieving; making a positive contribution and achieving social and economic well being.

Self-evaluation

Usually a form completed for Ofsted that sets 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.

Targeted services

Services that are not available to everyone but are aimed at people who have specific needs. It might include parenting classes to help manage children's behaviour, or specialist help for families of children with learning difficulties and disabilities.

Universal services

The services provided by a children's centre that are open to all children and their families who need them. These might include things like antenatal care; breast feeding clinics; stay and play sessions; toddler groups 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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