

A report on the responses to the consultation on how Ofsted should inspect children's centres

Between July and September 2009 we consulted on the proposed inspection framework for the inspection of children's centres. This report details the results of the consultation and our proposed way forward.

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Introduction

Between July and September 2009 Ofsted consulted on the proposed framework for the inspection of children's centres. This report gives the results of the consultation and our proposed way forward.

Background to the consultation

Children's centres provide a range of services for children and their families. They have been set up in stages from 2004, starting with the most disadvantaged communities. The Government's target is to have a children's centre in every community by April 2010.

Children's centres that have been set up by local authorities using government funding provide a range of services for children aged under five and their families. Children's centres provide, or signpost families to, early learning and childcare, family support, health services, support into employment and links to other specialist services. The Government views children's centres as an essential way of improving outcomes for young children, and for closing the gap between the most disadvantaged children and others. Outcomes for children are taken from the Government's Every Child Matters guidance: staying safe; being healthy; enjoying and achieving; making a positive contribution; and having economic well-being.

The Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families has asked Ofsted to inspect and report on the effectiveness of each children's centre. A new Act recently passed by Parliament – the Apprenticeship, Skills, Children and Learning Act – will give Ofsted the legal duty to do this.

In response to these proposed new duties, Ofsted is developing a framework for inspecting children's centres. This framework will describe how the general principles and processes of inspection will be applied to children's centres in England. We are testing the framework through a national programme of pilot inspections in a variety of centres during 2009. We will use the information gathered from these pilot inspections and from this consultation to develop the inspection framework. We anticipate that a full programme of children's centre inspections will begin in 2010. The Department for Children, Schools and Families will decide how often we inspect each children's centre.

The consultation methodology

We consulted with stakeholders on this issue from July 2009 to September 2009. The consultation included:

- a questionnaire completed by the Ofsted parents' panel which includes parents from a range of areas and backgrounds

- an online consultation that was open to any interested members of the public
- an evaluation of 19 pilot inspections which took place between March and June 2009, and included an evaluation conference for those involved in the pilot inspections, which was held in July 2009
- a discussion on the proposals for inspection with Ofsted's National Consultative Forum, and the Children's Centre Advisory Board.^{1,2}

Key findings

Parents' panel consultation

We received 914 responses from parents on the Ofsted parents' panel which produced the following key findings.

- The large majority of respondents agreed that the areas proposed for inspection covered all the issues they would like to see included in Ofsted's inspection and report on a children's centre.
- Respondents felt most strongly that in its inspections of children's centres, Ofsted should examine how well the centre gives advice on how to find specialist help, for example for disabled children.
- Respondents felt least strongly that in its inspections of children's centres, Ofsted should examine how well the centre provides support to help parents find work or training.

In addition to responding to the specific questions asked, 273 respondents made additional comments.

The full results are detailed in Annex 1.

Online consultation

We received 289 responses to the online consultation and the participants included:

- one hundred and fourteen people (39%) representing existing children's centres
- thirty-four people (12%) working for local authorities
- ten people (3%) from schools
- thirty-two people (11%) representing other organisations, including national bodies representing those involved in children's centres.

¹ The National Consultative Forum consists of a range of national organisations representing childcare and children's social care providers.

² The Children's Centre Advisory Board is a group of senior professionals involved in children's centres.

The key findings were that:

- the large majority of respondents supported the proposals for inspecting children's centres
- respondents most strongly agreed with the proposal that children's centres should be asked to complete one self-evaluation form, even where this is for different types of recipient
- respondents most strongly disagreed with the proposal that where a school includes a children's centre, there should be an additional section in the school's self-evaluation form to record the evaluation of the children's centre
- respondents also agreed that local authorities should contribute evidence to the inspection of children's centres.

The full results are detailed in Annex 2.

Evaluation of pilot inspections

1. The proposed model for inspection was generally well received by children's centre managers, local authorities and inspectors. Most felt that the key questions would enable inspectors to make accurate judgements about the overall effectiveness of the centre. Children's centre managers were positive about the grade descriptors for the various judgements used in the proposed inspection model, which they felt would help with their own self-assessment and in identifying areas where they could improve. Participants in the evaluation conference identified that some grade descriptors required greater differentiation between judgements of outstanding, good and satisfactory to ensure that judgements are clear.
2. Participants felt that the arrangements for setting up and carrying out the inspections were clear and helpful. The pilot inspections were run over two days, with inspection activity starting mid-morning on day one and ending in the early afternoon on day two. Participants felt that two inspectors on site over two days, with an earlier start and later finish, was just sufficient for those centres mainly based on one site. For more complex or rural centres, it was felt that additional inspection time would be needed. There was strong agreement that inspectors needed to have the right expertise and experience to undertake these complex inspections. Inspectors should have a thorough understanding of the purpose of children's centres, the multi-agency aspects of their work, and the particular relationships that centres develop with parents.
3. Children's centres were generally pleased with the swift responses they received to any queries and with the approach taken by inspectors before, during and after the inspection. During the pilot inspections, we gave centres between five and 10 working days notice of the inspection. Most centres felt that five days would be sufficient to enable them to prepare for the inspection

and make any necessary arrangements, for example to ensure that front line staff from other agencies would be available.

4. Gathering evidence on outcomes for children was the most challenging aspect of the inspection. Children's centres and local authorities felt they needed more guidance on what evidence inspectors would look for in judging the impact of services on outcomes. All participants felt that a single self-evaluation form, aligned with the inspection framework, would support the centre's self-evaluation and help with the efficient preparation for the inspection.
5. Participants found the inspection reports to be clear and helpful, and expressed a preference for the use of bullet points setting out the main strengths and areas for improvement, with text for the main findings. However, it was felt by the participants that the reports would be less helpful to parents in this format.
6. Comments from the evaluation conference have been incorporated into the revised evaluation schedule which we are using for the next phase of the pilots in October/November 2009.

Discussion with National Consultative Forum/Children's Centre Advisory Board

7. There was strong agreement by both these groups with the proposed inspection framework for children's centres. Members of both groups provided detailed comments on the inspection framework, and these have been incorporated into the revised version, which we are using for the next phase of the pilots in October/November 2009.

The way forward and timetable for further work

8. We are grateful for the level and detail of responses we have received during the consultation.
9. Given the strong support for the proposals from all areas of the consultation, we intend to continue developing the inspection framework for children's centres in the way proposed in the consultation document. In developing this framework, we will take into account the responses made by participants during the consultation. For example, we will use the second phase of pilots to test out the framework on different models of children's centres, and look at different options for notice periods for inspections.

In particular, given the comments made during the consultation, we will:

- continue to develop a single framework that focuses on the core offer from children's centres, with recognition in the inspection report of the individual organisation of the centre and what it offers.
 - make clear in the inspection report the development phase of the children's centre, the types of services it offers, and the model/organisation of the children's centre being inspected
 - make clear in published material that we will include sub-judgements, such as the effectiveness of partnerships and integrated services; we will also publish our evaluation schedule, which explains how we define the judgements, what factors we will consider when reaching them, and set out our benchmarking principles for judging centres as 'outstanding', 'good', 'satisfactory' and 'inadequate'
 - continue to test the inspection framework in the next stage of pilots in October/November 2009 in around 40 children's centres, to ensure that we cover different models of children's centres such as rural centres and centres operating as a 'cluster'.
 - refine the inspection framework further in the light of these further pilots, to ensure that it addresses issues raised during that pilot phase and by respondents to the consultation
 - carry out further development work on how the school self-evaluation form would include the children's centre, particularly in cases where the children's centre is linked to a number of schools, or where the school is not directly responsible for the children's centre.
10. Some of the responses to the consultation raised wider issues about the way in which children's centres are set up and run, including:
- comments on the proposals set out in the Apprenticeship, Skills, Children and Learning Bill
 - the wish for a single self-evaluation form for children's centres covering all recipients
 - the varying degree of support and involvement in children's centres by local authorities, which responses indicate may be a 'patchy' picture across the country.

We will pass these additional comments and views to the Department of Children, Schools and Families, which leads on the legislative proposals and on the development of children's centres.

Annex 1: Analysis of parents' panel consultation

Ofsted's Parents' Panel is a representative online panel of over 1,600 parents and carers with children attending state schools, and/or using registered childcare in England. The panel is managed on Ofsted's behalf by the British Market Research Bureau.

Please note: figures are rounded and may not add up to 100.

Q1: To what extent do you agree or disagree that these areas for inspection cover all the issues you would like to see included in Ofsted's inspection and its report?

Outcome

24% strongly agreed
65% agreed
8% neither agreed nor disagreed
2% disagreed
1% strongly disagreed.

Q2.1: How important is it for Ofsted to examine how well the centre includes the families in greatest need?

Outcome

40% said it was essential
39% said it was very important
19% said it was fairly important
2% said it was not important.

Q2.2: How important is it for Ofsted to examine how well the centre publicises its services to local parents?

37% said it was essential
47% said it was very important
15% said it was fairly important
2% said it was not important.

Q2.3: How important is it for Ofsted to examine how well the centre provides a place for parents to meet and help each other?

Outcome

19% said it was essential
40% said it was very important
34% said it was fairly important
6% said it was not important.

Q2.4: How important is it for Ofsted to examine how well the centre provides support just before and just after childbirth?

Outcome

24% said it was essential
40% said it was very important
28% said it was fairly important
8% said it was not important.

Q2.5: How important is it for Ofsted to examine how well the centre gives advice on how to find specialist help, for example, for disabled children?

Outcome

47% said it was essential
41% said it was very important
10% said it was fairly important
2% said it was not important.

Q2.6: How important is it for Ofsted to examine how well the centre provides support to help parents find work or training?

Outcome

17% said it was essential
36% said it was very important
32% said it was fairly important
15% said it was not important.

Q2.7: How important is it for Ofsted to examine how well the centre monitors its own performance in order to understand how it is doing?

Outcome

38% said it was essential
41% said it was very important
19% said it was fairly important
3% said it was not important.

Q2.8: How important is it for Ofsted to examine how well the centre shows that it provides value for money?

31% said it was essential
37% said it was very important

28% said it was fairly important
5% said it was not important.

General comments

Of the 914 parents responding, 273 made additional comments. The main comments received can be grouped into three principle areas:

- what else parents thought Ofsted ought to look at during inspection, or other comments about inspectors and inspections
- general comments about the organisation and running of children's centres
- specific comments about services that a children's centre should offer.

Ofsted inspections

The inspection should:

- look to ensure that children's centres treat children equally and fairly
- examine the cost of running the centre/cost per place/value for money
- ensure that there are sufficient trained, qualified and properly checked staff
- check that children are properly safeguarded and that they can talk in confidence to staff about issues such as abuse
- see how well the centre ensures that it reaches out to everyone in the community and is accessible to all
- see how well the centre engages and communicates with parents and links to other services
- look at how well the centre advertises its services and gives parents information about other services that they can access.

Inspectors should:

- ensure that they discuss with parents and others using the services how effective they feel the centre is at meeting their needs
- be sufficiently skilled, qualified and experienced to inspect children's centres
- turn up unannounced or with very little notice – there were several comments about how announced inspections meant that the centre invested time in preparing for the inspection rather than delivering its services, and how inspectors did not see the centre 'as it is'.

Children's centres – general

Children's centres should:

- have good standards of hygiene, cleanliness and safety, particularly in terms of the fabric of the building
- advertise their services so that people know what is on offer
- communicate widely with parents in the local community.

Children's centres – specific

Children's centres should:

- give advice to parents on how to provide healthy and nutritious meals on a budget
- provide support to parents on accessing health services, and promote healthy lifestyles
- consider the different family lives and backgrounds of children and parents using the centre
- provide services for teenagers, the 14–18 age group was mentioned, including teenage parents, those who are disaffected and have nowhere to go to meet their peers, and those who are having difficulties at school or at home.

Annex 2: Analysis of children's centre online consultation

Please note: figures are rounded and may not add up to 100.

Q1: Do you agree that it is appropriate to use one inspection framework for all children's centres regardless of how they are organised and what they offer?

Outcome

26% strongly agreed
45% agreed
6% neither agreed nor disagreed
10% disagreed
7% strongly disagreed
5% did not respond.

Main comments

- The inspection framework will need to be flexible enough to accommodate differences in the way in which children's centres are organised and the services they offer. For example, if a centre is only signposting services rather than providing them directly, the inspection should judge the effectiveness of the signposting, rather than the services themselves.
- Differences in types of children's centres need to be reflected, for example:
 - phase 1, 2 and 3 children's centres
 - 30% and 70% models of children's centres
 - those that offer childcare and those that do not
 - those on a school site and those that are not
 - those in disadvantaged urban areas and those in rural areas
 - 'cluster' centres and single site centres.
- Inspectors using the framework will need to be up to speed with the different types of centre.
- Single framework is important to allow comparisons to be made, as long as it is flexible enough to cover differences in children's centres.
- Single framework should allow space to evaluate the different services on offer.
- While all children's centres are very different, all of them must meet the core offer, and a single framework will ensure that they are all meeting shared goals, visions and outcomes.

Q2: Do you agree that the following key questions in the framework are sufficient to allow inspectors to capture the work of every children's centre?

- How good are the outcomes for those served by the centre?
- How good is the provision?
- How effective are the leadership and management of the centre?
- What is the centre's capacity for sustained improvement?
- How effective overall is the children's centre in meeting the needs of, and improving outcomes for, those served by the centre?
- What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Outcome

19% strongly agreed
53% agreed
9% neither agreed nor disagreed
10% disagreed
2% strongly disagreed
2% did not know
5% did not respond.

Main comments

- Clear information needed on what constitutes 'good' and 'effective' and how this will be defined.
- Not enough information about how the judgements will be made to give a view on this.
- Possible additional questions needed around how the centre works with parents, partners and local authorities, also questions needed around the governance of the centre, and the effectiveness of the centre in integrating services.
- Questions are flexible enough to take account of the differences between centres, and consistent with other Ofsted inspections.
- How would we measure outcomes, when much of a children's centre's work is longitudinal and it is difficult to demonstrate the direct link between the children's centre and the outcome?
- Possible overlap between 'how good are the outcomes for those served by the centre?' and 'how effective overall is the children's centre in meeting the needs of and improving outcomes for those served by the centre?'

Q3: Do you agree that local authorities should contribute evidence to the inspection of children's centres?

Outcome

40% strongly agreed
42% agreed
8% neither agreed nor disagreed
4% disagreed
0% strongly disagreed
1% did not know
5% did not respond.

Please note: one response strongly disagreed with question 3, but due to rounding this is shown as 0%.

Main comments

- Local authorities have overall legal responsibility for the children's centre so it is essential that they contribute.
- Some local authorities do not have enough knowledge or understanding of what the children's centre does to enable them to contribute.
- The annual self-evaluation form /annual conversation need to be drawn together and should be used to help inform the inspection.
- Essential for the local authority to be able to demonstrate how it has monitored progress in addition to what the children's centres themselves have done.
- Local authorities should be supporting children's centres by providing essential data against which each centre can measure its progress, for example breastfeeding rates.
- Involvement in this way will encourage local authorities to take a proactive role in the centre.
- Need to be aware of the different relationships that local authorities have with children's centres, for example some are run and managed by the private, voluntary and independent sectors, while some are maintained directly by the local authority.
- Need to avoid duplicating the local authority's role in different Ofsted inspections, for example Comprehensive Area Assessments.
- Other key partners – such as the Primary Care Trust – should also be invited to give evidence.

Q4: Do you agree that a single, annual update, through discussion or written statement, would allow the local authority to contribute evidence on developments to the way they deliver children's centres without causing undue time pressures?

Outcome

18% strongly agreed
53% agreed
9% neither agreed or disagreed
8% disagreed
2% strongly disagreed
4% did not know
6% did not respond.

Main comments

- This annual update should be linked to the annual conversation that the local authority has with the centre and also tied in with the completion of the annual self-evaluation form. A single, annual update encompassing these elements would avoid making the process overly bureaucratic or time-consuming for authorities.
- Some children's centres may need more frequent involvement, for example newer centres or those that have undergone changes, while the update could be less frequent for good, well-established centres,.
- Annual update needs to be meaningful, that is not tick boxes, but real analysis, for example including examples of good practice.
- Frequency of the update should be linked to the outcome of the previous inspection.

Q5: If you think an annual update is a good idea, would you prefer this to be an annual discussion or a written statement?

Outcome

46% thought this should be a discussion
26% thought this should be a written update
11% thought it should be by other means
6% did not know
11% did not respond.

Main comments

- Written statement acts as a useful document for the centre to review itself against.
- The children's centre's strengths and weaknesses need to be discussed – a written statement on its own is insufficient.
- A written statement, followed by discussion; this approach was supported by many comments – many respondents felt there should be both a written statement and a discussion.

Q6: Do you agree that children's centres should be asked to complete one self-evaluation form, even where this is for different recipients?

Outcome

44% strongly agreed
42% agreed
4% neither agreed nor disagreed
3% disagreed
2% strongly disagreed
1% did not know
5% did not respond.

Main comments

- There should be one form with a 'golden thread' that links all the needs of the different recipients.
- A single self-evaluation form (SEF) would reduce time pressures on children's centres and allow them to focus more on delivery/practice.
- Requiring three separate SEFs is too bureaucratic and demanding of the centre.
- There is too much paperwork already – completing different SEFs will add to this.
- One good, well-structured SEF should be enough.
- More than one SEF is duplication and causes confusion.
- The SEF could support the Ofsted inspection and be used to inform the annual update.
- A single SEF would need to cover the needs of all the different recipients.

Q7: For a school that includes a children's centre, do you agree that we should include an additional section to record the evaluation of the centre's services within the school self-evaluation form?

Outcome

30% strongly agreed
28% agreed
8% neither agreed nor disagreed
15% disagreed
8% strongly disagreed
5% did not know
7% did not respond.

Main comments

- Would encourage genuine partnership/integrated working between the children's centre and the school.
- A children's centre serves a wider community than the school and cannot be seen as an 'add-on'.
- Depends on the relationship between the school and the centre – if the school is managing the centre or otherwise very involved, then it makes sense.
- School targets are very different to those of the children's centre.
- The children's centre SEF should be totally separate from the school's SEF – the focus is entirely different.
- The community served by the children's centre is often much wider than the school it is attached to.
- It would represent real progress to integrate them in this way.
- There may be separate management teams with separate responsibilities.
- The majority of the inspection report would then be about the school, with the children's centre simply being an add-on.
- While it would make sense to bring them together, including a separate section in the school SEF would not be sufficient.
- Children's centres serve a much wider community than the school – for example, providing services for people who are not in the school's age group.
- Children's centres need to be recognised in their own right.
- Children's centres often serve more than one school – each school that worked with the children's centre would need to have a section in its SEF under these arrangements.

- The purpose and delivery of a children's centre is far more complex than a school's, so this would not do justice to the children's centre.
- By putting the school SEF and the children's centre SEF together it would give the school an opportunity to provide a more holistic picture.

Q8: Do you agree that inspections of children's centre services should be integrated, wherever possible, with inspections of other provision?

Outcome

28% strongly agreed
 33% agreed
 11% neither agreed nor disagreed
 11% disagreed
 5% strongly disagreed
 4% did not know
 7% did not respond.

Main comments

- Process for this is all important – there are many complexities in inspecting children's centres, for example multi-agency working, that would need to be covered.
- Inspectors on the team will need to have the right training, skills, knowledge and experience.
- Difficulty in lining up inspections when the cycle is different, for example, schools and childcare.
- Would prevent a never-ending cycle of inspections for some children's centres.
- Important that in an integrated inspection the very specific role and identity of the children's centre is not lost.
- Sensible for centres to have an integrated, seamless inspection.
- Need to recognise the difficulty where a number of different providers are operating as part of the centre, for example, school, independent childcare provider, children's centre.
- The whole point of a children's centre is to develop holistic, integrated services – this would be supported by integrated inspections.
- Would need the inspection framework to be able to recognise different levels of quality in its judgements – for example, if the school was judged as 'inadequate' this could impact on the judgement for the children's centre, even if it was offering good quality provision.
- Need to be clear what 'other provision' would include.

- Could put additional pressure on some providers but might be easier than having to face more inspections.
- Need to think about how this would work in a multi-site/cluster centre.
- Depends on the management arrangements within the centre – for example, whether or not it is managed by the school.

Q9: Is there anything further you would like to say about our proposed approach to inspecting children's centres?

Outcome

Further comments were offered by 52% of respondents. As there was a range of diverse comments it was not possible to identify any themes from these general comments. However, most of the comments reiterated points already highlighted in responses to previous questions.