Inspecting children’s centres

Briefing for section 5 inspection

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# Background

1. There is a children’s centre in every community – around 3,500 in total. Centres are expected to provide, or make arrangements for families in that community (known as the centre reach area) to access early childhood services. In this context, early childhood services are:

* childcare for young children
* social services functions of the local authority relating to young children, parents and prospective parents
* health services relating to young children, parents and prospective parents
* 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.

1. The responsibility for the delivery and management of children’s centres lies with the local authority. Centres can operate in a number of different ways and each local authority has decided on the models of delivery it uses for its children’s centres. They serve communities with different levels of deprivation needing different types of services. Centres can make the early childhood services available by either providing the service at the centre itself or by providing advice and assistance to parents and prospective parents in gaining access to a service provided elsewhere. This is to ensure that even if a particular service is not delivered on site, parents and other users are actively supported in gaining access to that service. Relying on signposting services, for example through posters and leaflets, is not sufficient to meet the definition of making arrangements. All centres must directly provide some activities for young children and their parents.
2. Many children’s centres are managed by school governing bodies, mainly because they are located on the school site. Some are run as a totally separate entity and others have very close connections with the school. The extent to which there are close links depends on a number of factors such as:

* whether the reach area of the children’s centre matches the school catchment area
* the number of school pupils whose families use or used the children’s centre and its services

the extent to which the school uses the children’s centre to deliver its extended services and childcare provision.

1. The links with schools are variable but may include: involvement of the parents of pupils in family learning; transition arrangements; and an expectation that the school will provide ‘signposts’ to the services and activities available at or through the centre, such as access to benefits advice or adult education. Extended services provided by schools are different from services offered by children’s centres. While there may be some provision for young children, most extended services make provision for school age children and their families.

## Arrangements for inspecting children’s centres

1. Ofsted began new inspection arrangements for children’s centres in April 2010. The Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009, which received royal assent in November 2009, gives children’s centres a statutory basis and provides Ofsted with the duty to inspect and report on their effectiveness.
2. Ofsted has published a framework for inspecting children’s centres. It is complemented by guidance for inspectors and children’s centres. This describes how Ofsted applies the general principles and processes of inspection to children’s centres.[[1]](#footnote-2) Ofsted inspections will look at how centres:

* help children and families in their reach area access early childhood services and show them the benefit of doing so

improve outcomes for young children (The Childcare Act 2006 defines ‘well-being’ as the five outcomes for children commonly described as: being healthy; staying safe; enjoying and achieving; making a positive contribution; and social and economic well-being).

1. Children’s centres are at different stages of maturity and therefore the contribution each makes to the outcome areas will vary according to the services provided at the time of the inspection.
2. Ofsted has no enforcement powers in relation to the inspection of children’s centres. It is for local authorities, with their role in action planning after inspections, to agree with partner agencies how they will respond to the recommendations included within reports. Ofsted will take into account any improvements arising from actions at the next children’s centre inspection.

# Implications for section 5 inspections

1. Where centres are managed directly by a governing body, section 5 inspectors will need to consider the impact of any judgements about the children’s centre or the services and activities offered through or by the centre that might contribute to judgements on the school’s leadership and management. These services or activities might include:

* a nursery or pre-school in the children’s centre delivering the Early Years Foundation Stage
* a crèche service to allow parents of pupils to access family support services
* wrap-around care for pupils of the school
* family support services offered as part of the school’s extended services.

1. Inspectors must emphasise to the school’s and the centre’s head/s that they will not inspect the children's centre (although an inspection of the children’s centre may be happening at the same time led by a different inspection team).
2. It is possible that inspections of co-located children’s centres and schools may take place at the same time, wherever it is practical and possible to do so.
3. Where inspections happen at the same time and the children’s centre and school share the same management, or the school uses the centre to deliver some of its services, the judgements of one may have an impact on the other. Lead inspectors and/or the inspection team will need to share emerging findings with each other to make sure that relevant evidence is shared and that feedback takes account of judgements about related services. The extent to which judgements about the centre have an impact on those for the school will depend on a number of factors. These include the extent to which:

* governance and management are shared

the centre has shared users with the school – pupils or their families, for example:

* a maintained nursery school within a children’s centre that may take all its pupils from the centre’s reach area and offer places only to those children found to be most in need by the centre

a secondary or primary school governing body that manages a children’s centre on site but has very few shared users. Some parents with pupils at the school and younger children may use the centre and its services, or there may be some children in the reception class at school who are or have been centre users.

1. Wherever possible, lead inspectors should share draft reports before final submission to ensure consistency regarding shared provision. Each individual report from the coordinated inspection should be evaluated by the same quality assurance reader (provided by the inspection service provider) and one of Her Majesty’s Inspectors before being ‘signed off’. Although each report will be written for the individual school or centre, there may be similar judgements on shared provision and aspects of leadership and management. It is important that if judgements are different between the school and the centre, the reasons for this are clearly explained.
2. Inspections with no shared management or services may sometimes happen at the same time because centres are co-located with the school but there is no formal link or service-level agreement between them, other than arrangements about the lease of premises. In these inspections, judgements about one institution do not have an impact on the other. There may be very rare occasions when there are common issues relating, for example, to the site or premises but the judgements for each institution would not have an impact on each other.

### Before the inspection

1. If a children’s centre is managed by a school’s governing body, the school may make reference to the centre in any summative record of its self-evaluation. The children’s centre may have its own self-evaluation process and summary documents.
2. Where the lead inspector is aware that an inspection of the children’s centre is happening at the same time then they should make contact with the lead inspector of the children’s centre to exchange any information arising from self evaluation, arrange times during the inspection to meet to discuss emerging findings that may impact on the school’s inspection judgements.

### During the inspection

1. If an inspection of the children’s centre is taking place at the same time as the school’s, section 5 lead inspectors should consider whether judgements about the children’s centre, or of any registered early years provision it makes, may impact on judgements about the school.

### Writing the report

1. Where a children’s centre is managed by the school governing body, or it provides childcare and/or extended provision on behalf of the school, then the school’s inspection report should summarise the nature of these services under ‘Information about the school’ and should refer readers to any previous inspection reports on those services.
2. The impact of the provision may be reported in sections where it is appropriate.

**Further information**

1. Further information about children’s centres can be found on the Ofsted website [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk) and at: <http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/Parents/Preschooldevelopmentandlearning/NurseriesPlaygroupsReceptionClasses/DG_173054>.

1. You can find information about children and families services on the Ofsted website: <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/framework-for-childrens-centre-inspection-april-2013> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)