

# Children's centre inspection handbook

Handbook for inspecting Sure Start Children's Centres in England under Part 3A of the Childcare Act 2006 (as amended by the Apprenticeship, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009)

---

This handbook provides instructions and guidance for inspectors conducting inspections under Part 3A of the Childcare Act 2006 from April 2013. It sets out what inspectors must do and what children's centres, local authorities and their partners can expect and provides guidance for inspectors on making their judgements.

**Age group:** 0-5

---

**Published:** March 2013

---

**Reference no:** 130056



Corporate member of  
Plain English Campaign  
Committed to clearer communication

**361**

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](mailto: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/](http://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](mailto:psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk).

This publication is available at [www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/130056](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/130056).

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

Royal Exchange Buildings  
St Ann's Square  
Manchester  
M2 7LA

T: 0300 123 1231  
Textphone: 0161 618 8524  
E: [enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk)  
W: [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)

No. 130056

© Crown copyright 2013



# Contents

---

|                                                                                |           |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>Introduction</b>                                                            | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>Part 1. How children's centres will be inspected</b>                        | <b>6</b>  |
| Before the inspection                                                          | 6         |
| During the inspection                                                          | 15        |
| After the inspection                                                           | 23        |
| Quality assurance and complaints                                               | 24        |
| <b>Part 2. The evaluation schedule – how children's centres will be judged</b> | <b>25</b> |
| Judging the quality of a children's centre/children's centre group             | 25        |
| Access to services by young children and families                              | 26        |
| The quality and impact of practice and services                                | 28        |
| The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management                     | 32        |
| Overall effectiveness                                                          | 36        |
| <b>Annex A. Terminology</b>                                                    | <b>38</b> |
| <b>Annex B. Sources of evidence</b>                                            | <b>43</b> |
| <b>Annex C. Expressing proportions in words</b>                                | <b>45</b> |

## Introduction

1. This handbook sets out the main activities undertaken by inspectors who conduct inspections of children's centres in England from April 2013. It also sets out the judgements that inspectors will make and on which they will report.
2. A children's centre is defined by law<sup>1</sup> as a place or group of places:
  - managed by, or on behalf of, an English local authority, with a view to securing that early childhood services<sup>2</sup> are made available in an integrated manner
  - through which early childhood services are made available – either by provision of services on site, or by the provision of advice and assistance in gaining access to services elsewhere
  - at which (some) activities for young children<sup>3</sup> are provided on site.
3. Ofsted produces a written report for the local authority as the responsible authority for the centre<sup>4</sup> following each inspection.
4. Inspectors consider how each centre:
  - helps families with young children access early childhood services, including those families who find it difficult or are unwilling to do so
  - improves the well-being of young children and their families.
5. For the purposes of inspection, Ofsted recognises that children's centres may be organised as:
  - **a children's centre group**<sup>5</sup>  
A children's centre group will be treated as one children's centre because it has shared leadership and management **and** integrated services that are accessed across a locality<sup>6</sup> within one local authority. A children's centre group will receive one inspection which will result in the publication of a single inspection report.
  - **a single centre**  
These may work entirely independently of other centres or may work collaboratively, sharing a range of services in a given geographical area or locality. A single centre does not usually have shared leadership with other

---

<sup>1</sup> Children's centres are defined in Part 1 section 5A of the Childcare Act 2006 (as amended by the Apprenticeship, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009).

<sup>2</sup> See Annex A for a definition of early childhood services.

<sup>3</sup> Young children are children aged under five.

<sup>4</sup> Part 3A of the Childcare Act 2006 sets out the inspection requirements.

<sup>5</sup> See Annex A for the definition of a children's centre group.

<sup>6</sup> For the purposes of inspection, a locality is a geographical area that is usually smaller than the local authority as a whole (unless the local authority is a very small unitary authority); the locality is the area within the local authority that the inspection team covers.

centres and may not offer integrated services. Each single centre will receive its own inspection and inspection report.

6. From April 2013, inspectors will normally carry out inspections of up to five children's centres simultaneously in a local authority, so that the local authority can demonstrate the impact of centres' work across a wide area. This is particularly important where centres work collaboratively.
7. Any registered early years and childcare provision and/or maintained schools/academies' education provided as part of children's centre services will continue to be subject to different inspection arrangements.<sup>7</sup> Their inspections may be carried out at the same time as those of the children's centres wherever it is possible and practical to do so.
8. This handbook has two parts.
  - **Part 1. How children centres will be inspected:** this contains instructions and guidance for inspectors on the preparation for, and conduct of, inspections.
  - **Part 2. The evaluation schedule:** this contains guidance for inspectors on judging the quality of services provided by the children's centres they inspect and provides an indication of the main types of evidence inspectors will collect and analyse.

---

<sup>7</sup> See the *Framework for the inspection of provision on the Early Years Register* (120288), Ofsted, 2012; [www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/framework-for-regulation-of-provision-early-years-register](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/framework-for-regulation-of-provision-early-years-register). and the *Framework for school inspection* (120100), Ofsted, 2012; [www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/framework-for-school-inspection](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/framework-for-school-inspection).

## Part 1. How children's centres will be inspected

### Before the inspection

#### Selecting centres for inspection

9. Inspections of children's centre groups and single children's centres will be scheduled using the information Ofsted holds about the children's centres in each local authority. The main source of information used for inspection scheduling is the SureStart\_On database managed on behalf of the Department for Education.
10. The size and composition of the inspection team, and the number of teams deployed in each locality at any one time, will be dependent on i) how local authorities organise their centres and ii) the number of target families with young children in the reach area<sup>8</sup> served by each centre.

#### Inspection event and team

##### *Single centres*

11. Each single centre will receive its own inspection and inspection report whether inspected as a 'stand-alone'<sup>9</sup> inspection or inspected simultaneously as one of a number of other single centres in a locality.
12. A centre may be selected for inspection as a stand-alone event where it is not possible or proportionate to inspect it as part of a larger inspection event. Examples include:
  - a new centre where other centres in a locality have already been inspected
  - a centre that has previously been judged as inadequate or requires improvement
  - occasions where Ofsted decides an inspection is required because of information received, such as a concern about safeguarding.
13. **A stand-alone inspection** will usually be conducted over a period of two days with on-site preparation for the lead inspector on the afternoon before the inspection.
14. **Where single centres are inspected simultaneously**, up to five single centres in the same locality will usually be inspected at the same time by one inspection team. The inspection team will include inspectors with a range of expertise and will consist of an HMI lead inspector and team inspectors. The HMI lead inspector will be responsible for the oversight of the simultaneous

---

<sup>8</sup> A 'reach area' means the number of families with young children living in the defined area served by the children's centres.

<sup>9</sup> 'Stand-alone' is a term used here to describe the inspection of one single centre only.

inspections. Members of the inspection team will usually be designated to lead the individual inspections of the single centres being inspected, and will write the report for their designated centres.

15. Simultaneous inspections will usually be conducted over a period of three days. There will be some on-site preparation for the lead inspector and team members on the afternoon before the inspection.
16. More than one inspection team may be deployed to undertake simultaneous inspections where there are more than five centres working in the same locality. For example, if there are eight centres, there will be two inspection teams. Lead inspectors must make sure they make contact and share evidence and emerging issues where it is appropriate to do so.

### *Children's centre groups*

17. A children's centre group will receive one inspection. This will result in the publication of a single inspection report on the group as a whole rather than separate reports on each centre within the group. The inspection will usually be conducted over a period of three days. The inspectors will undertake some on-site preparation during the afternoon before the inspection.
18. Where a children's centre group is one part of the children's centre arrangements in a locality, more than one inspection team may be deployed at the same time. For example, if there are two children's centre groups operating in a defined geographical area, there will be two inspection teams. Where this is the case, lead inspectors must make sure they make contact and share evidence and emerging issues where it is appropriate to do so.

### **Notification**

19. Children's centres will receive up to three days' notice of the inspection, unless there are safeguarding concerns or issues related to children's welfare. On such occasions Her Majesty's Chief Inspector may decide to carry out the inspection without notice. The inspection liaison officer from the relevant inspection service provider is responsible for notifying the children's centres of the inspection. This will involve one telephone call for each individual centre, whether inspected at the same time as other centres or inspected as a stand-alone event, and one telephone call for a children's centre group.
20. Ahead of the telephone call the inspection liaison officer will check whether there are any other inspections (other than simultaneous inspections of other children's centres in a locality) planned for the days of the inspection, such as the inspection of a maintained nursery school attached to a children's centre or the inspection of registered early years provision, and inform the lead inspector. The inspection liaison officer will also check that there are no investigations planned, or on-going, of any registered early years provision in the single centre or children's centre group as this would result in consideration of a deferral.

21. Where there is more than one inspection team inspecting in a locality, the inspection liaison officer will, wherever possible, notify the children's centres being inspected by the inspection teams on the same day.
22. The inspection liaison officer should ask to speak to the children's centre leader(s) of each individual centre being inspected alone or simultaneously; or the group leader or manager<sup>10</sup> where the inspection is of a children's centre group; or, in the absence of either, the person who is in charge in their absence.
23. The inspection liaison officer will tell the children's centre leader that the lead inspector will make contact by the end of the following working day.
24. The inspection liaison officer will also use the notification phone call to:
  - confirm the dates of the inspection and the pre-inspection planning day
  - confirm the type of inspection – that is, whether it is to be a children's centre group inspection or a single children's centre inspection; where a number of single-centre inspections are taking place simultaneously, each centre leader should be informed of this
  - give the centre the names of the inspectors in the team and contact details for the lead inspector of that children's centre
  - confirm the name of and contact details for the centre leader and confirm whether the centre leader will be the key contact for the duration of the inspection, or another person
  - note any times when the centre leader/key contact for the inspection will be available to have a detailed telephone discussion with the lead inspector
  - confirm the name and email address of the local authority's lead officer for the children's centre
  - confirm links or partnerships with any other provision such as a school, registered early years provision, adult education or advice and guidance providers
  - provide the centre leader with details about how to access documents related to the inspection on the Ofsted website, including the leaflet for centre users
  - confirm that as part of their pre-inspection on-site planning the lead inspector will require copies of:
    - the centre's self-evaluation (sent electronically beforehand if possible)
    - action/development plans (sent electronically beforehand if possible)
    - the activity programme(s) (sent electronically beforehand if possible)
    - the safeguarding policy

---

<sup>10</sup> For the purposes of this document this person is referred to as the centre leader.

- the centre’s staff list and record of recruitment and checks with the Disclosure and Barring Service (formerly the Criminal Records Bureau)
  - any evaluations carried out of services or activities, or other evidence of impact of the work of the centre
  - the timetable of services and activities for the days of the inspection
  - performance and tracking data and other management information.
25. After the notification phone call, the inspection liaison officer will send the following information to the centre by email, copying in the lead inspector:
- confirmation of inspection dates
  - the names and pen portraits of the inspectors
  - information about the inspection process
  - the link to the *Framework for children’s centre inspection* and guidance documentation
  - guidance on setting up the inspection programme.
26. The inspection liaison officer will send an email notifying the named local authority officer with responsibility for children’s centres of the inspection. The email should give the name of the centre(s), dates of inspection, the name and contact details of the lead inspector (email and phone number).

## Requests for deferrals

27. If a centre requests a deferral of its inspection the inspection liaison officer must make Ofsted aware of this. Ofsted will decide whether this should be granted in accordance with Ofsted’s policy on the deferral of inspections.<sup>11</sup> The deferral policy makes it clear that the absence of a centre leader is not normally a reason for deferring an inspection.

## Inspectors’ planning and preparation

### *Pre-inspection information*

28. The inspection liaison officer will provide the lead inspector with relevant pre-inspection information including:
- any relevant inspection reports, such as school inspection reports, early years inspection reports, childcare inspection letters and other information held about the centre

---

<sup>11</sup> The deferral policy is available at <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/deferral-of-inspections-information-for-childrens-centres>.

- information about any other simultaneous inspections taking place within the locality and whether there are any inspections of registered early years provision and/or schools taking place at the same time
  - any information received by email from the children's centre such as the self-evaluation form, action plan and activity programme.
29. The lead inspector is responsible for distributing the information to all relevant team members involved in the planning, including individual centre leads.

*Lead inspector's initial phone call*

30. The lead inspector for each centre being inspected will contact the centre leader(s) by the end of the working day following the notification phone call.
31. The lead inspector's telephone call is an important opportunity to initiate a professional relationship between the lead inspector and the centre leader(s). It should be short and focused on practical issues. Inspectors should not use this as an opportunity to probe or investigate the centre's self-evaluation or any other matters.
32. The purpose of the lead inspector's initial call is to:
- make sure the centre is clear about the inspection and reporting arrangements
  - gather any additional essential contextual information about the centre that is needed to plan the inspection
  - agree the arrangements for the on-site preparation and planning day
  - make arrangements for discussions with key people including the centre leader, local authority lead, key staff/partners/stakeholders and parents – these may be by telephone call
  - confirm the relevant documents needed on the first day of inspection or during the on-site preparation meeting
  - provide an opportunity for the centre leader to raise any initial questions.

*Inspectors' preparation: lead inspector*

33. Two days are allocated for the lead inspector to prepare for the inspection, including the initial telephone call(s). The lead inspector should use information from the telephone call, any information supplied through the inspection liaison officer and local authority website to access background information about the children's centres to be inspected.
34. The lead inspector must prepare for the inspection by gaining a broad overview of all the children's centres specified for the inspection and how they are organised. The lead inspector will need to determine whether the information gathered during the initial phone call is different to that shown on the

SureStart\_On database. For example, what is shown on the database as three single centres may very recently have been brought together as one children's centre group. If there have been significant changes to the size and complexity of the children's centre(s), the lead inspector should contact the operational lead for children's centres or their line manager.

35. The lead inspector must use the first of the two preparation days for home-based work, and will hold discussions with the centre leader(s), write a short team briefing and prepare for the on-site pre-inspection meeting. In the case of large and/or complex centre groups, an assistant lead inspector may be assigned who will also have two days' preparation time. If there is no self-evaluation form, the lead inspector will ask the centre or local authority to provide a brief up-to-date verbal summary of their self-evaluation and relevant information during the on-site preparation day.
36. The second day will be used for travel to the centre and for on-site preparation. On-site preparation will start with a meeting of the lead inspector, the centre leader and the local authority lead officer responsible for the centre.
37. The lead inspector will decide who else to meet in order to gain a full overview of provision in the area. Where one inspection team is responsible for the simultaneous inspection of up to five single centre inspections, and where the centres do not work collaboratively, separate meetings may be held with the individual centre leaders. The lead inspector will decide how many meetings are needed.
38. The purpose of these initial meetings is to:
  - discuss the available evidence and the inspection trails – the centre leader will have the opportunity to clarify the self-evaluation and to provide any new contextual information; key points arising from the discussion during the visit should be noted on an evidence form and a bullet point list of inspection trails should be shared with the centre
  - finalise the inspection programme, including the arrangements for joint observations
  - identify any activities that it would not be appropriate for inspectors to observe, such as one-to-one counselling sessions or ante-natal appointments (it may be possible for an inspector to speak to parent(s) before or after such appointments)
  - discuss the meeting schedule and confirm the names of attendees and the organisations they represent, ensuring there is no unnecessary duplication of attendees at different meetings.
39. The lead inspector should check that the draft inspection programme(s) include all essential meetings and that there is enough time built into the programme for team discussion, preparation for feedback and any travel between sites. The outcomes of the preparation must be summarised on evidence forms.

40. Wherever there is more than one inspection team inspecting across a locality in the same week, lead inspectors will contact each other on their first preparation day to arrange a convenient time during the course of the inspection to discuss and agree how to share any relevant information, resources and emerging judgements.
41. Lead inspectors will deploy their inspection team members as they see fit. All members of the inspection team will contribute to the evaluation of each of the key judgements and come to a collective view about the quality and impact of the services provided by the centre.
42. Irrespective of the type of inspection, the lead inspector should draw up a short inspection team briefing and send this electronically to the team inspector(s). The team briefing should also be shared with the centre leader(s) and include:
  - team responsibilities and, for a simultaneous inspection, the name of the inspector assigned to the role of centre lead for a single centre
  - key contact details
  - where the team will be based
  - the first draft of the inspection timetable
  - the main inspection trails
  - a brief summary of contextual information
  - judgement grades and key areas for improvement from any published reports for centres within the area already inspected and for any school, nursery school and early years provision sharing leadership and management with the centre.

*Inspectors' preparation: team inspectors – 'stand-alone' single centres*

43. One preparation day is allocated to team inspectors, which includes travel to the centre where the on-site preparation and initial team meeting is to be held. The team members' preparation day takes place on the lead inspector's second preparation day.
44. The lead inspector will allocate visits and interviews and will most likely take the lead on the evaluation of leadership and management, including safeguarding arrangements.

*Inspectors' preparation: team inspectors – children's centre groups and simultaneous inspections of single centres*

45. One preparation day is allocated to team inspectors, which includes travel to the centre where the on-site preparation and initial team meeting is to be held. The team members' preparation day takes place on the lead inspector's second preparation day.

46. The team members' on-site preparation will include an initial team meeting where the lead inspector will confirm the arrangements for the inspection trails, responsibilities and ways in which evidence will be shared and collated as the inspection progresses. Where relevant, the lead inspector will confirm the report writing arrangements for each single centre being inspected.
47. During individual on-site preparation time, team inspectors should:
  - familiarise themselves with the centre(s) they are inspecting, including the local context
  - familiarise themselves with the inspection programme and the sessions and activities they will observe, including any joint observations with centre staff
  - ensure they have sufficient time to liaise with the centre leader and key staff in any centre they have been assigned to familiarise themselves with inspection trails
  - identify any additional meetings they may need to request through the lead inspector
  - analyse any available data
  - prepare for meetings.

### *Planning the inspection programme*

48. Inspectors will need to cover as wide a range of activities as possible during the inspection. The lead inspector must agree a programme of activities for the inspection with the centre leader(s) as part of the on-site preparation but this may be subject to change during the course of the inspection where new inspection trails and/or evidence emerges.
49. Inspectors will not have to visit every activity or every site where services are being delivered. Based on the pre-inspection analysis, activities, visits and meetings should be selected to provide the best range of evidence needed to make valid inspection judgements and report on all aspects of the evaluation schedule.
50. The centre's leaders should have opportunities to substantiate their self-evaluation and to demonstrate that self-evaluation is effective. Inspection trails should be shared with the centre's leaders to give them the opportunity to show inspectors where evidence can be found.
51. Inspectors should try to speak to as many families who use the centre as possible. They need to be aware of the potential sensitivity of some activities and sessions on offer. In some cases it will be appropriate for centre staff to support family members in discussions with inspectors.
52. Where inspectors work across a number of centres, inspectors should meet with their key contact and make arrangements for a tour of the centre they are responsible for inspecting. This is to gain insight into relationships, the quality

and accessibility of services, site security and the quality and use of accommodation. This tour should take place during the on-site preparation day, or at the start of the first day of inspection.

53. Inspectors will not make a tour of the locality but, where possible, the lead inspector should designate a team member to visit any site that provides healthcare as part of the centre's integrated working – or visit this him/herself.
54. The centre leader should be invited to attend inspection team meetings and help ensure that relevant evidence is made available to inspectors. The centre leader may not contribute to inspectors' judgement-making or to any decisions made about inspection grades.
55. The lead inspector must keep the centre leader informed of emerging inspection findings as the inspection proceeds. If the centre leader has concerns these must be raised with the lead inspector as soon as they occur.
56. Where there are simultaneous inspections taking place, the lead inspector must decide which meetings should be held at centre level and which should be held at locality level.

### **The role of the local authority**

57. As the local authority is responsible for the children's centres in its area, the lead officer should meet the lead inspector during the on-site preparation and attend the formal feedback meeting to hear the findings first-hand. Depending on the type of inspection being conducted, there may be a requirement for additional meetings.
58. In all types of inspection inspectors will ask the local authority to provide information and evidence including:
  - the data the local authority provides/collates for the centre, including contextual data such as population; health indicator/outcomes and the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile data for the locality
  - the performance objectives and targets it agrees with the centre or children's centre group and/or commissioned providers, and its performance monitoring arrangements including any key performance indicators
  - how it works with partner organisations to gather and share relevant information and integrate services delivered through the centre, including details of any formal agreements
  - information about financial and resource allocations
  - information arising from consultations with parents, decisions taken after such consultations, and relevant changes that have been put in place.

## **The role of stakeholders**

59. Where a provider has been commissioned to run the centre on behalf of the local authority, the lead inspector will involve any group or area manager in the pre-inspection and formal feedback meetings. Inspectors will take into account the commissioned provider's role in monitoring and meeting any key performance indicators set by the local authority at provider or centre level. This involvement is in addition to that of the local authority, not a replacement for it.
60. Where any services and activities such as health services or adult learning classes are delivered by other providers, their impact, effectiveness and contribution will be considered and appropriate representatives will be invited to attend specific meetings.

## **During the inspection**

### **The start of the on-site inspection**

61. When first arriving at the centre, inspectors must show their identity badges and ensure that the centre leader has been informed of their arrival.
62. The lead inspector should meet briefly with the team to clarify the inspection trails, activities and responsibilities.

### **Gathering and recording evidence<sup>12</sup>**

63. Inspectors must spend as much time as possible gathering first-hand evidence on the impact of the activities and services provided by, or through, the centre and how families access those services. Inspectors will observe on-site activities, talk to centre staff, users and other professionals involved in providing early childhood services and consider the data and information provided by the local authority and the centre.
64. On any subsequent inspections, inspectors must consider the impact of the action plan produced by the local authority on the recommendations arising from the last inspection.
65. Inspectors will record their evidence clearly and legibly on evidence forms, ensuring that all relevant sections of the form are completed for all evidence-gathering activities. This includes records of analyses of data and the evidence that underpins key judgements. Evidence forms should also be used to summarise the main points of discussion when feeding back to leaders and the local authority.

---

<sup>12</sup> Annex B contains guidance about the range and type of qualitative and quantitative evidence that inspectors may use.

66. It is important that inspectors record accurately on the evidence form the time spent gathering the evidence.
67. When gathering evidence across a number of single centres, inspectors must be careful not to share information about individual families or staff members.

## **Observations**

68. Inspectors carry out observations in order to evaluate the quality and impact of the activities, practice and services offered by the centre and its partners. These observations will normally be graded. Inspectors will provide feedback on the key strengths and areas for improvement to the practitioner when they have been observed for 20 minutes or more. Inspectors will choose which, and how many, activities and services to visit based on the programme provided by the centre leader and the appropriateness of inspector involvement in those activities. Inspectors will not normally announce the sessions and times they will make observations unless they need to secure the permission of the adults involved in sessions such as ante-natal appointments, a case review or outreach workers' home visits.
69. Inspectors will not look for a preferred methodology (such as a specific evidence-based parenting programme for example), but must ensure that sufficient evidence is collected so that strengths can be identified and specific recommendations made about improvements that are needed.
70. There are many different ways of planning observations. Inspectors should not be constrained by a single approach, but should use their professional judgement to plan an appropriate 'observation strategy'. For example, inspectors may engage in:
  - short, focused observations of activities – these will usually last around 15 minutes and have a specific focus
  - longer observations of sessions such as 'stay and play' to consider how staff use these sessions to identify children's and families' needs
  - observations of small adult group sessions, after which they may talk to adults about what they have gained from the session
  - activities that capture evidence of best practice, or identify factors that contribute to recommendations for improvement
  - tracking the individual case of a specific child, adult or family to assess the direct impact of services and activities.

## **Joint observations**

71. The lead inspector should invite the centre leader to take part in joint observations. After a joint observation, the inspector and centre leader must discuss their views about the quality of activity or service they have observed. If the centre leader offers a written record, the inspector should consider this.

Any differences in the analysis and evaluation of the activity or service should be explored. The joint observation and subsequent discussion will allow the inspector to engage in a professional dialogue with the centre leader. It will also enable the inspector to:

- assess the accuracy and quality of the centre's monitoring and evaluation of practice, activities and services
- collect evidence in order to make specific recommendations about improvements to practice
- discuss the effectiveness of the centre's performance management arrangements and professional development programme for staff
- help the centre leader to understand the judgements inspectors are making about the quality and impact of practice and how it might be improved.

72. Where the quality of practice is weak, it is important that the inspector talks to the centre leader about what has been observed. The inspector should also ask about the action the centre is taking, if any, to bring about improvement. Where the centre leader gives feedback the inspector should observe the feedback, as this may provide evidence about the robustness of discussions about practice and the effectiveness of the centre's arrangements for professional development and performance management.
73. The inspector should complete an evidence form on any sessions jointly observed and the feedback given. Any notes taken by the centre leader should remain in the centre and not be included in the evidence base for the inspection.

### **Seeking the views of families, young children, partners and stakeholders about the work of the centre**

74. The views of those who use the centre are central to inspection. Inspectors will take every opportunity to speak with centre users during the inspection.
75. Once notified of the inspection, the centre leader will be asked to take reasonable steps to notify those families and partner agencies that use the centre, and to display a notice in the centre informing users of the inspection. If a parent or prospective parent asks to see an inspector, the team should do all it can to accommodate such requests, within the constraints on their time.
76. Inspectors will aim to talk with parents including those holding representative responsibilities, for example members of the centre's advisory board. These meetings may be in the form of one or more focus groups of parents or prospective parents. In addition, inspectors will gather the views of families via other means. This may include observing a range of activities and finding out from staff how they seek parents' views.

77. When inspectors meet families, staff, other service providers/partners and other stakeholders, comments made by individuals should be treated in the strictest confidence. Whilst every effort should be made to protect the identity of individuals and the origin of their comments if they are used to pursue an issue further, there may be circumstances in which it is not possible to guarantee the anonymity of an interviewee. Additionally, inspectors have a duty to pass on disclosures that raise child protection or safeguarding issues and/or where serious misconduct or potential criminal activity is involved.
78. Satisfaction surveys and questionnaires carried out by the centre and/or the local authority can also provide additional evidence for the inspection, and may indicate themes for further exploration. They will **not** replace the inspectors' dialogue with families and children during the inspection.
79. During the inspection, inspectors will interview front-line workers including representatives from the centre's partner agencies such as health visitors, adult learning providers, job centre service providers, those responsible for outreach work and the manager(s) of any registered early years or childcare provision where applicable. The interviews and discussions can be conducted by telephone.
80. Lead inspectors will also take account of any external views of the centre's performance. This includes the local authority's evaluation of the centre's performance against its targets.

### **The use of qualitative and quantitative data**

81. Inspectors will want to find out whether centres can explain the relevance of the data they collect, show how the data are used, how data analysis informs decisions about the centre's activities and the impact these have on children's well-being and families' lives.
82. In general, inspectors will look for:
  - data about the make-up of the area and locality
  - a needs analysis of the families with young children in the area that identifies the families and young children most in need of intervention and support (target groups)<sup>13</sup> and the types of services that will benefit them most
  - contact data, including information about outreach visits and their impact
  - participation data, including those that relate to the centre's activities as well as activities provided externally – this includes, for example, take-up of the free entitlement to early education; centres should be able to show the numbers of participants from particular groups, including target groups

---

<sup>13</sup> See Annex A for more information.

- agreed targets and service level agreements with the local authority and key partners
  - evidence about how participation and contact rates have improved over time, particularly in relation to target groups and those identified as being most need of intervention and support
  - unemployment rates in the locality
  - evidence of ways in which services and activities have been adjusted following consultation with parents, including those in the wider community who may not be using the centre
  - data in relation to the key performance indicators provided by the local authority at reach area level.
83. As there are very few standardised data other than the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile data, inspectors will use their professional judgement to assess whether data are sufficient to demonstrate how well the centre knows its community; whether it is meeting or exceeding its agreed targets, especially in relation to target groups and those families identified as being most in need of intervention and support, and whether its agreed targets with the local authority appear realistic.

### **Case studies and case tracking**

84. Case studies provide useful information about the centre's services. However, inspectors should be cautious about relying too heavily on case studies that do not have robust underpinning data. Most centres will have many families that like the centre and what it does, but this does not necessarily mean it is effective.
85. Where the centre is involved in targeted intervention and prevention work, inspectors will select case files of young children and families to assess the effectiveness of the centre's targeted work. When carrying out case tracking, inspectors should consider whether the files and other information held:
- are kept up to date with sufficient detail
  - are shared appropriately with the family and between different agencies
  - show evidence of planning and assessment
  - demonstrate improvement
  - show that interventions are timely, sustained and sufficiently well designed to meet the needs of the child or family
  - show evidence of regular staff supervision
  - are validated wherever possible through meetings with front-line workers, observations of the children and/or family and discussions with the family.

86. As a minimum, inspectors will consider case studies for five families. This may increase depending on the size of the centre and number of children under five in the locality. The centre should provide the lead inspector with a list of all families registered with the centre:
- whose needs are identified and monitored under a common and shared assessment framework
  - who have children deemed to be in need or are subject to a child protection plan
  - who have children in the care of the local authority
  - who have children with a known or emerging disability.
87. The lead inspector will select an appropriate number of cases to track and allocate them to the most suitably qualified member of the team. The allocated inspector will read the key documents within the case file, which may include the referral form, common assessment and resulting plan, closing summaries and case evaluations as appropriate, and summarise their findings on an evidence form.

### **Inadequate judgements**

88. If a centre is giving cause for significant concern by the end of day one on a stand-alone single centre inspection, or day two of a children's centre group or simultaneous inspection, the lead inspector should forewarn the centre leader of the possibility that the centre's overall effectiveness may be judged inadequate. It must be emphasised that final judgements are not made until the final team meeting towards the end of the inspection.
89. Inspectors should refer to the evaluation schedule to review the significance of weaknesses in relation to each judgement, including the overall effectiveness judgement.
90. If the overall effectiveness is judged to be inadequate, the lead inspector should telephone the operational lead for children's centres or their line manager.

### **Reaching final judgements**

91. The lead inspector will ensure that there is sufficient time planned during the inspection for team members to consider all the available evidence and to prepare for team meetings and the final feedback. At the final team meeting, final judgement grades should be recorded and key points for feedback identified. The lead inspector will invite the centre leader to this meeting, emphasising that s/he should not contribute to the decisions on judgements and grades reached.

### *Reaching judgements for a children's centre group*

92. While inspectors must consider the strengths and weaknesses of the different centres within the group and the contribution they make to the quality of the provision overall, the key judgements and the overall effectiveness judgement apply to the **children's centre group** rather than the individual centres within it. Where one individual centre within the group is weaker than others, inspectors will need to consider if this is sufficient to judge the children's centre group as a whole as inadequate. The effectiveness of leadership and management, how well leaders and managers have identified weaknesses and are tackling them, and the impact of their actions will contribute to the decision on overall effectiveness.
93. Before reaching judgements for the children's centre group as a whole, inspectors will consider and weigh up:
  - the quality of provision offered at each centre
  - how well key services are integrated and provided across the centre group
  - whether parents are able to access the services they need at a location that is convenient for them.

### *Reaching judgements where centres work collaboratively*

94. Where the inspection team inspects simultaneously more than one single centre that works in a collaborative arrangement, inspectors will consider the evidence about the effectiveness of shared services and the impact this has on the judgements for each centre. While the quality of the shared service may be the same across centres working collaboratively, the key judgements for individual centres may be different according to a number of factors. These may include:
  - how the centre uses information to plan which families would benefit most from the service
  - families' access to services
  - how information is shared between a centre/the shared service to assess and plan for families' needs.
95. The lead inspector must be able to reconcile and explain any differences in judgements for individual centres where services are shared. This includes situations where there are two inspection teams inspecting in the same locality.

### **The formal meeting for final feedback**

96. At the end of the on-site inspection there must be a brief, formal meeting to give final feedback. Wherever possible, attendees must include the centre's leader and the lead officer from the local authority and at least one representative from those responsible for governance. It is for the lead

inspector to decide, following discussion with the centre leader, whether other senior staff should be present.

97. Where feedback is taking place in a number of centres simultaneously, it will not be possible for the coordinating lead inspector or local authority lead to attend all meetings. The coordinating lead inspector will decide on the most appropriate feedback arrangements in these cases, and how the local authority lead will be informed of the main findings for each centre in advance of the formal feedback meeting.<sup>14</sup> The lead inspector for each individual centre will normally give feedback to the individual centre.
98. The lead inspector should explain to those present that the on-site element of the inspection has concluded and the purpose of the feedback session is to share the main findings of the inspection and ways in which the centre should improve further. The lead inspector should remind the centre leader, those responsible for governance and the local authority lead officer that they may seek brief clarification about the judgements but should not offer further evidence or challenge judgements. Any feedback or comments should be in the form of professional and objective language. An evidence form should be completed by an inspector summarising the key points raised at the feedback.
99. Before leaving, the lead inspector or the individual centre lead must ensure that the centre is clear:
  - about the grades awarded for each key judgement
  - that the grades may be subject to change as a result of moderation and should, therefore, be treated as confidential until the centre and local authority receive a copy of the final inspection report
  - that the main findings of the inspection and the main points provided orally in the feedback will be referred to in the text of the report
  - about the recommendations for improvement
  - about the procedures leading to the publication of the report
  - that the centre is encouraged to complete the post-inspection survey
  - about the requirement for the local authority to disseminate the report and produce, publish and monitor an action plan in relation to the recommendations
  - about the complaints procedure.

### **Implications for a centre judged as inadequate**

100. If a centre is judged to be inadequate, the timescale for publication of the report is extended so that judgements can be moderated. Centres that are

---

<sup>14</sup> The zip file of additional materials includes examples of inspection programmes that show how this might be arranged.

judged as inadequate will be reinspected within 12 months of the most recent children's centre inspection.

101. The action plan produced by the local authority in relation to the findings of the previous inspection will form an important part of the evidence for the reinspection.<sup>15</sup>

### **Implications for a centre judged as 'requires improvement'**

102. Centres judged as 'requires improvement' will be subject to monitoring and support and will normally be inspected again within a maximum period of two years and earlier if required. The timing of the inspection will reflect the individual circumstances of the local authority and the centre and will be informed by what inspectors find out as part of their monitoring activities.

## **After the inspection**

### **Writing the report**

103. For group and single centre inspections the lead inspector will write a report following the report template guidance. Where an inspection team carries out simultaneous inspections and inspects a number of centres in a locality, each centre will have a designated lead inspector who will write the report for that centre and submit it to the coordinating lead inspector for review before submitting the report to the inspection service provider. The coordinating lead inspector must read all the reports to make sure any common and agreed judgements about shared services are reported accurately.

### **Arrangements for publication of the report**

104. For centres judged as 'requires improvement', 'good' or 'outstanding', the inspection service provider will forward the report to the centre for a factual accuracy check shortly after the end of the inspection. The centre has one working day to respond. The lead inspector will respond to the centre's comments about factual accuracy.<sup>16</sup>
105. Centres judged as 'requires improvement', 'good' or 'outstanding', and their relevant local authority, will normally receive an electronic version of the final report within 15 working days of the end of the on-site inspection.
106. For centres judged as 'inadequate', the inspection service provider will forward the report to the centre for a factual accuracy check shortly after the end of the inspection. The centre has five working days to respond. The lead inspector will respond to the centre's comments about factual accuracy.

<sup>15</sup> There is more guidance available on re-inspecting centres previously judged as inadequate in the zip file of additional guidance.

<sup>16</sup> If there should be a grade change or the text of a report has been subject to significant amendments after the factual accuracy check, the lead inspector should talk this through with the centre leader.

107. Centres judged to be 'inadequate', and their relevant local authority, will normally receive an electronic version of the final report within 28 working days of the end of the on-site inspection.
108. Once a local authority has received the report it must make arrangements with the centre for the report to be distributed in accordance with statutory guidance and an action plan produced.<sup>17</sup>
109. Ofsted will publish the inspection report on its website five days after it has been sent to the local authority for distribution.

## **The evidence base for the inspection**

110. The evidence base for the inspection will be retained for the period of time specified in Ofsted's *Handling and retention of inspection evidence*<sup>18</sup> guidance.

## **Quality assurance and complaints**

### **How are inspections quality-assured?**

111. Responsibility for assuring the quality of the inspection and the subsequent report lies with Ofsted. The lead inspector is expected to set clear expectations for the team and ensure that those expectations are met. The lead inspector must ensure that all judgements are supported by evidence and that the way in which the inspection is conducted meets the expected standard.
112. Inspections may be subject to quality assurance by HMI and/or senior inspection service provider managers. When an external quality assurance visit is scheduled, the lead inspector should explain clearly the purpose and likely format of the visit during the initial telephone conversation with the centre leader.

### **What happens if a centre has a concern or complaint during the inspection?**

113. If a centre raises a concern or complaint during the course of an inspection, the lead inspector should seek to resolve it. It is often easier to resolve issues on the spot and this helps to avoid formal complaints later. Concerns may also be raised with a quality assurance inspector should one have been allocated to the inspection. If the concerns are not resolved by these means, the person raising the concern should be referred to the Ofsted helpline on 0300 123 1231 and/or be referred to the formal complaints procedures available at [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk).

---

<sup>17</sup> Sure Start Children's Centres statutory guidance. DCSF (now DfE), 2010; <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/AllPublications/Page1/DFE-00020-2011>.

<sup>18</sup> *Handling and retention of inspection evidence* (100122), Ofsted, 2010; <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/100122>.

## Confidentiality

114. Ofsted will use information gathered during the course of the inspection process for children's centres. However, all reasonable steps will be taken to ensure that the identity of named individuals remains strictly confidential. This will not be disclosed unless Ofsted considers that the information provided indicates that there is a likelihood of harm to individuals, in which case the necessary information will be passed to the local authority's child protection staff for action.
115. As Ofsted is a public body, information held may be subject to a request for disclosure under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 or subject access request under the Data Protection Act 1998. Such requests will be processed fairly and lawfully in accordance with our usual procedures and exemptions applied where these are relevant.

## Part 2. The evaluation schedule – how children's centres will be judged

116. The evaluation schedule sets out the sources of evidence and grade descriptors that guide inspectors when they inspect children's centres. The evaluation schedule is not exhaustive and inspectors must use a best fit approach, applying their professional judgement. It must be used in conjunction with the guidance set out in Part 1 of this document. Inspectors must take into account the statutory definition of a children's centre (see page 4 of this document) and whether the centre fulfils this definition when they interpret grade descriptors in relation to the context of the centre, the local community or reach area and the young children and families it serves.

### Judging the quality of a children's centre/children's centre group

117. Inspectors **must** judge the overall effectiveness of the centre. This is the overarching judgement.
118. In order to make a judgement about the overall quality of a centre, inspectors must first make three key judgements. These are:
  - access to services by young children and families
  - the quality and impact of practice and services
  - the effectiveness of leadership, governance and management.
119. In judging the quality of the provision and the impact of service provided by the centre, inspectors will decide whether the centre is 'outstanding' (grade 1), 'good' (grade 2), 'requires improvement' (grade 3) or is 'inadequate' (grade 4).

120. Children's centre inspections primarily evaluate how well individual children and families benefit from the work of the centre. Inspectors must judge whether the centre has identified the specific families living in the centre's area whose circumstances indicate they are likely to be most in need of support, and how well it serves them, thereby helping them to improve their lives. These families are referred to in the evaluation schedule as target groups. There is more information about target groups in Annex A.
121. In addition, inspectors must judge if a centre has an appropriate balance of services including those offered to all families, known as universal services, and targeted provision.<sup>19</sup>
122. When making judgements, inspectors must consider the proportion of families and young children in the community that the centre supports. The evaluation schedule uses percentage proportions expressed in words. Annex C gives the details of these.

## **Access to services by young children and families**

123. Inspectors must evaluate and report on:
  - the access to early childhood services by families including those expecting children and those in target groups
  - the effectiveness of strategies for encouraging families to participate in relevant services, including those who may be less likely to do so.
124. Inspectors must take account of and consider the extent to which the centre:
  - works with partners to identify the families with young children in its area
  - establishes and maintains contact with targeted families in its area
  - has identified the target groups and individual families most in need of intervention and support, the specific nature of their needs, and the universal and specialist services needed to support them
  - prioritises families that need support appropriately, for example representation on key strategic local groups such as multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARAC)
  - uses outreach work to identify target groups and encourage those families who would otherwise be unlikely to access services the centre has to offer
  - provides or facilitates arrangements for targeted children to take up the free entitlement to early education, especially disadvantaged families with two-year olds

---

<sup>19</sup> Targeted provision refers to a range of specialist services that are aimed at young children and families living in the area who have been identified as being in most need of help and support (target groups).

- provides or facilitates access to universal activities and relevant services for targeted families, and monitors how many families use them and continue to use them until their needs have been effectively met.

### **Grade descriptors – access to services by young children and families**

Note: these descriptors should not be used as a checklist. They must be applied adopting a 'best fit' approach that relies on the professional judgement of the inspection team.

#### **Outstanding (1)**

Meets or exceeds all the requirements for a good judgement and in addition:

- Highly challenging access and participation targets in highly relevant provision are met or exceeded and/or evidence shows a discernible trend of sustained improvement in meeting such targets over time.
- Information sharing between the centre and its partners is exceptionally well-established with the result that all or almost all families with young children are known and target groups identified. Shared information is used to plan carefully targeted provision.

#### **Good (2)**

- Information and data are shared effectively between partners and demonstrate that most<sup>20</sup> families with young children in the reach area are known, and that target groups are identified.
- A large majority of families from target groups within the area the centre serves are registered with the centre and have access to information, advice and guidance about early childhood services through the centre, its partners or its outreach work.
- Consultation, referrals, outreach work, universal services, observations, assessments and discussions are used effectively to identify needs and match families to the services they need, including specialist services.
- There are effective systems for monitoring access to services, attendance and participation. These systems identify any targeted families that fail to participate regularly.
- Strategies to promote early childhood services and engage families, especially those who would otherwise be unlikely to participate, result in the large majority of target groups accessing the centre and engaging with relevant services.
- Outreach work is effective in supporting families in target groups and

<sup>20</sup> See Annex C, which provides guidance on expressing proportions in words.

helping them to access and sustain their involvement with services so that the large majority of families in those groups continue to remain engaged until their needs are met effectively.

- Most children of families from targeted groups take up the free entitlement to early education through the centre's own provision or through the centre helping families to find high-quality provision elsewhere.
- Assessment at age two, where available to the centre, identifies which children are most in need of early intervention and the centre works with families and other agencies to enable most children identified through this process to access the help they need.

### **Requires improvement (3)**

- Does not meet the grade descriptors for good.

### **Inadequate (4)**

Access to services is likely to be inadequate if any of the following apply.

- The centre does not have robust enough data to identify the families or groups that should be targeted in the community and/or partnerships do not facilitate the sharing of data for this purpose.
- Information available from data, observations, outreach work and assessment is insufficient and/or is not used well enough to identify families' needs accurately or in sufficient detail.
- The centre does not know how many families are regularly engaging with the centre and fails to prioritise families sufficiently or engage with some key target groups so that only a minority of those targeted and most in need engage with the centre and its services.
- Target families find it difficult to access services because the services are too dispersed, run infrequently or inconveniently and do not meet the needs of targeted families and, as a result, participation rates are poor or variable.

## **The quality and impact of practice and services**

125. Inspectors must evaluate and report on:

- the quality, range and relevance of the universal and targeted services provided for the families living in the centre's reach area

- the impact of practice and services in improving target children's school readiness and health and well-being, and improving parenting skills and the lives of target families.

126. When making their judgements, inspectors must consider:

- the effectiveness of partnerships with early years providers, schools, health services, adult training services and employment services in providing the activities and services required to achieve the agreed outcomes for targeted families
- whether the services directly provided are appropriate and relevant for the needs of targeted families in the area, taking account of how they are decided on, planned, the intended outcomes and how these will be measured
- the quality and impact of services in improving outcomes, or sustaining already very good outcomes, in the following areas:
  - the readiness of target children for school
  - improved parenting
  - opportunities for target adults to participate in activities that improve their personal skills, education and employability
  - the development of healthy lifestyles for target children and their families
  - parents' understanding of their responsibilities for their children's safety and well-being, including their e-safety
- the effectiveness of any intervention and prevention work in protecting target children and securing their well-being
- any follow-up work and/or tracking<sup>21</sup> of children and their targeted families after they have completed courses or activities to identify sustained impact
- how well practitioners work with target children and parents, are good role models and have sufficiently high expectations and aspirations for targeted families
- the effectiveness of the care, guidance and support that the centre and its partners provide
- how the centre facilitates opportunities to volunteer, to contribute to the running of the centre and to develop formal and informal networks of support.

### **Grade descriptors – the quality and impact of practice and services**

Note: these descriptors should not be used as a checklist. They must be applied adopting a 'best fit' approach that relies on the professional judgement of the inspection team.

---

<sup>21</sup> Tracking is used here to mean monitoring of the effectiveness and impact of the centre's work.

## Outstanding (1)

Meets or exceeds all the requirements for a good judgement and in addition:

- Services are excellent because they are having significant impact on almost all of the targeted families and the centre is remorseless in seeking engagement with those most in need.
- Almost all target parents identified as needing to develop and extend their parenting skills attend parenting courses and the centre's data show the vast majority of their families have improved lives
- The centre's monitoring data and information show that almost all young children attending the centre's early years provision or other formally linked provision in the community make exceptional progress in being prepared for school and any gaps in educational achievement are reducing rapidly.
- The centre makes highly effective use of target individuals' existing skills and interests and inspires them to make significant gains in their personal development.
- Partnership working and integrated service delivery are exemplary.
- Professional practice is highly effective and innovative; practitioners are reflective, learn from contemporary research and theory and make a significant contribution to the centre's continuous improvement.

## Good (2)

- Planning, observation, assessment of progress and tracking are effective and demonstrate a clear focus on improving outcomes and reducing inequalities for a majority of young children and targeted families.
- Tracking shows that a large majority of children from target groups have made good progress from their individual starting points in their personal, social and emotional development, physical development and communication and language skills so that most children are working within age-related expectations when starting school.
- A large majority of targeted families in the area identified as needing to develop and extend their parenting skills complete appropriate courses<sup>22</sup> and tracking shows the positive impact of the course on family life.
- Almost all adults supported by the centre develop a good understanding of their responsibilities for their children's well-being and how to ensure the

<sup>22</sup> This may include evidence-based parenting programmes and/or other forms of family and parenting support that are aimed at developing and improving parenting skills and reducing incidents of harm or injury to children.

safety of their families. Data show that targeted intervention, prevention and early help provided through the centre or partner agencies have a significant and positive impact on children.

- The centre provides access to high-quality services for most adults identified as needing help to acquire the learning, training, qualifications and advice necessary to improve their economic stability and chances of employment. A large majority of adults who access courses complete them and tracking shows that targeted adults improve their literacy, numeracy and/or language skills and/or the qualifications or skills needed to improve their chances of employment.
- Almost all of the centre's health-specific targets are met as a result of services provided directly by the centre, or by services provided by partner agencies.
- The centre provides effective support, advice and training which is improving the quality of linked early years provision in the local area.
- Effective cooperation and data/information sharing between professionals ensures assessment is robust. As a result, a large majority of families in target groups receive the help they need, including from more specialist services, in a timely manner.
- Assessments of need, case files and records are maintained to a high standard, are up-to-date and reflect the targeted families' views and wishes and the involvement of other professionals.
- The centre is a hub for the community and a majority of parents from target groups actively contribute to the development of activities. They also volunteer in the centre and local community, establish their own informal networks of support and contribute new ideas. Achievements are regularly celebrated and individuals are encouraged to build on these in order to improve their life chances.
- An appropriate balance of universal and targeted services successfully engages a large majority of families in the area and makes a good contribution to their personal development and well-being.

### **Requires improvement (3)**

- Does not meet the grade descriptors for good.

### **Inadequate (4)**

The quality and impact of practice and services is likely to be inadequate if **any** of the following apply:

- The centre fails to track and monitor the quality and impact of the services

it delivers and does not sufficiently identify the outcomes it intends to meet.

- The centre fails to develop and extend the parenting skills of at least a minority of adults from targeted families and/or fails to identify those adults who would benefit most from help and support.
- The centre does not help to promote improvement in formally linked early years provision in the area and/or act as a hub or focus for community services for families with young children effectively.
- The centre is not effective in its intervention and prevention work and does not protect target children and secure their well-being. This includes their readiness for school and the development of healthier lifestyles.
- Partnership working is not sufficiently established to enable accurate and precise assessments that identify targeted families' needs or demonstrate the impact of services.
- Practice is poor and inconsistent, and planning, observation and assessment do not demonstrate how services are adjusted or adapted to engage target families and improve their outcomes.

## **The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management**

127. Inspectors must evaluate how efficiently and effectively the centre is managed and examine the impact of leaders at all levels, including that of governors, the local authority and any private, voluntary or independent provider the local authority has commissioned to run the centre on its behalf.

128. Inspectors must evaluate and report on:

- the effectiveness of governance, leadership and management
- the effectiveness of the monitoring of the centre's performance
- the effectiveness of the centre's policies and procedures, including those for safeguarding and staff recruitment and vetting
- the availability of resources and services to meet young children and families' needs.

129. When evaluating the quality of leadership, governance and management, inspectors must consider:

- how the local authority, any private, voluntary or independent provider the local authority has commissioned to run the centre on its behalf, governors and centre leaders use evidence and robust data to set and agree on performance and outcome measures that can reduce inequalities and improve the lives of families in their area
- the challenge provided by local authorities and how this contributes to improved performance

- the effectiveness of strategic partnerships, including any service level agreements or joint and collaborative working, intended to ensure that the centre is able to deliver, commission or make other appropriate arrangements for children and families
- the rigour and effectiveness of self-evaluation systems used to inform the centre's priorities and set challenging targets for improvement; this includes how any information from complaints is used to drive up service improvement
- the extent to which staff delivering the centre's services are appropriately qualified, drawn from a range of professional backgrounds and the effectiveness of systems for supervision, performance management and the continuous professional development of staff
- the effectiveness of the policies, procedures and practices in place, including those for staff recruitment and vetting and safeguarding and promoting the welfare of young children, including their e-safety
- the effectiveness of monitoring of target groups to ensure the removal of any perceived inequalities and/or barriers to engagement
- the extent to which families contribute to the centre's performance and delivery, for example through advisory boards
- how the centre knows that children and families are satisfied with the centre and its services and how well their views are taken into account to improve access and to shape services
- the extent to which resources are used effectively and efficiently to meet agreed local priorities and the needs of targeted children and families living in the area including the level of innovation in attracting new resources and/or services
- the extent to which those targeted parents who have accessed the centre's services and achieved positive outcomes for themselves and their families encourage other parents to use the centre's services.

### **Grade descriptors – the effectiveness of leadership, governance and management**

Note: these descriptors should not be used as a checklist. They must be applied adopting a 'best fit' approach which relies on the professional judgement of the inspection team.

## Outstanding (1)

Meets or exceeds all the requirements for a good judgement and in addition:

- Highly effective leadership, strong partnership working and a shared pursuit of excellence in all of the centre's activities has led to notable improvements in access, practice, provision and outcomes, or has built on previously outstanding performance.
- Self-evaluation, performance management, staff supervision and professional development opportunities are exemplary and used astutely to drive continuous improvement within the centre and for early years settings the centre supports in the local community.
- Acutely sensitive, integrated and inclusive practice celebrates diversity and makes an excellent contribution to the development of harmonious relationships and social integration in the local community.

## Good (2)

- The local authority, any other relevant agencies and the centre agree and implement appropriate, precise and challenging outcome and performance measures, based on a secure and accurate analysis of the needs of targeted families in the centre's area, and have ambitious aspirations for them. A very large majority of performance measures are met and lead to sustained and demonstrable improvements for families, especially those in target groups.
- Governance arrangements are well-embedded, provide effective challenge and are demonstrably driving the centre's continuous improvement.
- There are effective service level agreements and other protocols in place at strategic and local levels to enable good cooperation and information sharing between the centre and its partners. Leaders monitor cross-agency partnerships to make sure there are no barriers to information sharing or access to the services families need, and this contributes to good or strongly improving outcomes for those families most in need.
- The culture of safeguarding is embedded and robust policies, procedures and practices are in place and ensure that safeguarding and the welfare of children remain at the forefront of the centre's purpose. The centre works collaboratively with partners to reduce the risk of harm to children successfully.
- Parents and children are consulted about their needs and any changes to services. Most centre users are fully involved in the design and development of services, contribute to decision-making about key priorities for the centre and encourage other parents to use the centre's services. They report a consistently high level of satisfaction with the quality and the

ability of services to meet their needs and improve outcomes for them.

- There are effective arrangements for evaluation and improvement of services and activities including those delivered by partners. Parents, children and practitioners all contribute to an evaluation of the centre and the outcomes of evaluation are used systematically and in a timely way to shape service developments and improvement.
- Data and management information, including that from consultations, concerns and complaints, are used well to deliver continuous improvement and sustain high-quality provision that is sensitive to the diverse needs of the local community.
- Performance management and professional supervision are well established and consistently applied across all aspects of the centre. Poor and mediocre performance is swiftly identified and tackled and further training and professional development opportunities identified and secured.
- Financial resources available to the centre are well deployed through effective partnership working, integrated service delivery and innovative practice. Resources are used effectively and efficiently to allow the centre to meet its targets and improve outcomes for those in most need.

### **Requires improvement (3)**

- Does not meet the grade descriptors for good.

### **Inadequate (4)**

Leadership governance and management are likely to be inadequate if **any** of the following apply.

- Leaders and governors are not meeting their legal obligations
- Safeguarding arrangements are poor. There is a limited focus on preventative services and family-centred support that may lead to a failure to respond to some children and families in need of services.
- Performance and outcome measures do not cover all the identified priorities; priorities are not sufficiently identified and measures lack sufficient challenge, and as a result outcomes are not improving fast enough to narrow life chance gaps for target groups. There are insufficient data to demonstrate that targets are met, including data from key partners.
- Governance arrangements are weak and do not provide sufficient challenge to the centre and/or there is little evidence of shared ambition and priorities, resulting in a lack of integrated services that meet the needs and requirements of the range of families within the local area, particularly those in most need.

- There is limited strategic direction to partnership working resulting in some barriers to integrated working and the sharing of information so that needs may not be identified.
- Senior leaders cannot convincingly demonstrate they are monitoring the quality of services and performance. There is little evidence that parents are consulted about priorities and their views are not always taken into account when implementing changes.
- Resources and services are insufficient to meet identified priorities and resources are not being maximised resulting in insufficient capacity to meet the needs of targeted young children and families.

## Overall effectiveness

130. Inspectors should make overall effectiveness the final judgement taking into account the three key judgements.
131. To reach an overall judgement, inspectors will consider whether the centre is meeting its legal requirements to make sufficient early childhood services available to parents and prospective parents in its reach area/locality, including making some activities available on site.
132. They will consider the difference the centre makes to the young children and families in the local area it serves. Inspectors will then decide whether the centre's overall effectiveness is outstanding, good, requires improvement or is inadequate.
133. When coming to this judgement, inspectors must also consider:
- the effectiveness with which the centre makes arrangements for targeted families to access the services they need in order to improve children's well-being
  - the quality of universal and targeted services and the impact they have on outcomes for targeted young children and their families
  - the effectiveness of governance, leadership and management in meeting their duties, monitoring performance and making sufficient resources available to meet the needs of young children and families in the area.
134. Where the inspection is of a children's centre group, inspectors must consider any differences in access to or the quality of provision and services across the different centres in the group and the impact of these on the overall needs of families across the group's reach area/locality.
135. Where the inspection includes consideration of shared services across a number of centres working collaboratively, inspectors must take into account how each individual centre identifies the families that need the shared services and how it helps families to access those services.

## Grade descriptors – overall effectiveness

Note: these descriptors should not be used as a checklist. They must be applied adopting a 'best fit' approach which relies on the professional judgement of the inspection team.

### Outstanding (1)

- The centre's practice consistently reflects the highest aspirations for all children and their families and in particular those in target groups and, as a result, inequalities are reducing rapidly.
- All three key judgements are outstanding. Exceptionally one of the key judgements may be good and rapidly improving and all other principal aspects of the centre's work are good or outstanding.

### Good (2)

- The centre's practice enables most targeted children and their families to access good-quality services that improve children's well-being and achieve the centre's stated outcomes.
- Other principal aspects of the centre's work are likely to be at least good.

### Requires improvement (3)

- The centre's practice is not yet good because one or more of the key aspects of the centre's work, or its leadership and management, require improvement.
- No key judgement is inadequate.

### Inadequate (4)

- The centre is likely to be inadequate if inspectors judge one or more of the key judgements as inadequate.

## Annex A. Terminology

**Advisory board:** a group of persons who represent the interests of the children's centre users. The role of advisory board members is to provide advice, assistance and challenge to centre leaders in order to ensure that the children's centre operates effectively and efficiently and fulfils its remit.

**Childcare Act 2006:** the law that sets out:

- duties on local authorities to improve outcomes for children and to ensure access to information about childcare provision in their area
- the legal provisions for the regulation and inspection of provision for children from birth to age 17
- the Early Years Foundation Stage – the framework for the delivery of quality integrated care and education for children from birth to the 31 August following their fifth birthday.

**Children's centre inspection types:** for the purposes of inspection, children's centres may be organised as:

- a children's centre group
- single centres.

A **children's centre group** has shared leadership and management **and** integrated services. Although it will consist of several centres, it is inspected as one children's centre and this will result in the publication of a single inspection report.

For the purposes of inspection, a **single centre** has one inspection and this will result in the publication of a single inspection report. A single centre:

- will normally have one main site although it may have other sites (often known as satellites) that are not centres in their own right and may open for only limited times and offer only limited services
- will offer some activities for children on at least one site
- may share particular services with other centres either through a formal or informal arrangement. We will normally refer to this as **collaborative working**.

In some cases a single centre may share management with other centres but does not offer integrated services with those centres (for example a local authority may have commissioned all phase two centres out to a third party organisation across the whole authority but each centre operates in its own right and does not share services).

**Common Assessment Framework:** a process whereby practitioners such as health visitors, social workers and children's centre outreach workers can identify a

child's or young person's needs early, assess those needs holistically, deliver coordinated services and review progress.

**Early childhood services** include: early years provision; the social services functions of the local authority in relation to young children, parents and prospective parents; health services relating to young children, parents or prospective parents; provision of assistance to parents and prospective parents for training and employment; and information and assistance for parents and prospective parents.

**Early support programme:** a programme for the families and carers of disabled children under five years of age. It allows families to co-ordinate the support they receive from health, education and social care professionals and organisations, and ensures they have more involvement in the care of their child and the organisation of future plans.

**Early Years Foundation Stage:** the statutory framework for the early education and care of children from birth to the 31 August following their fifth birthday. It includes requirements for the provision of young children's safeguarding and welfare, and their learning and development, which all providers must meet, as well as good practice guidance. The Early Years Foundation Stage must be delivered by all schools and early years settings that are registered on the Early Years Register.

**Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP):** this provides parents and carers, practitioners and teachers with a summary of a child's knowledge, understanding and abilities, and an assessment of their progress against the early learning goals. It must be completed for all children in their final term in the Early Years Foundation Stage.

**Early years provision:** providers who are registered by Ofsted to care for children in the early years age group. These include:

- maintained and independent schools, including academies, directly responsible for provision for children from birth to the age of three or where no child attending the provision is a pupil of the school
- childcarers, such as childminders, day nurseries, pre-schools, wrap around provision and private nursery schools, which provide for children in the early years age group.

**Employability programmes:** short learning programmes aiming to help unemployed learners into work. Terms used for unemployed people on benefits include: work-related activity group (WRAG), jobseekers allowance (JSA) and employment support allowance (ESA).

**E-safety:** in the context of an inspection, e-safety may be described as the centre's ability to protect and educate children and staff in their use of technology.

**Families** includes: parents and young children, and prospective parents and carers including wider family members.

**Inspection services provider (ISP):** inspection services providers are external organisations contracted by Ofsted to provide Additional Inspectors, administrative support on inspection, the collation of pre-inspection information for inspectors via a portal, quality assurance and production of reports, and post-inspection evaluation by providers.

**Inspections of childcare and/or early education:** inspections of the Early Years Foundation Stage or requirements of the Childcare Register provided directly by a centre or by schools and settings working in partnership with the centre. It does not refer to all inspections of childcare and early years in the reach area of the centre.

**Joint observations:** an opportunity for senior centre staff to observe a particular activity session, course or other piece of work with an inspector, and discuss key findings from this.

**Key contact:** usually a senior member of the centre's staff who has been designated to provide the vital key link between the children's centre and the inspection team. The key contact is usually the centre leader and he/she is usually the person invited to attend team meetings. In addition this person undertakes other critical tasks throughout the inspection related to the organisation of inspection timetables and activities and the evidence base that inspectors require. Where there is an inspection of more than one centre operating as a group or a simultaneous inspection of single centres, each centre may have a named contact who liaises with a named inspector.

**Locality:** a geographical area that is usually a smaller unit than the local authority as a whole (unless the local authority is a very small unitary authority). For the purposes of inspection, the locality is the area within the local authority that the inspection team covers. Where possible, inspections of centres in a locality will happen simultaneously allowing for the sharing of some evidence and inspector resource. Inspection in a locality may consist of:

- one or more children's centre groups
- merged or supercentres (where two or more centres have merged to have a large reach area)
- up to five single centres (this may be a collaborative arrangement)
- a reach area of around 3,000
- any combination of these depending on local authority arrangements.

**Parents:** include fathers, mothers, carers and other adults with responsibility for looking after a child, and prospective parents.

**Reach area** (may be abbreviated to 'area'): a designated geographical area within the local community which is the centre's catchment area.

**School readiness:** refers to how well prepared a child is to succeed when s/he starts school, and the extent to which s/he has acquired the skills, abilities and knowledge needed to make the most of the school curriculum.

**Stakeholder:** a person, group or organisation who has an interest or concern in the children's centre.

**'Stand-alone':** is used to describe the inspection of one single centre only, where circumstances mean that it is not possible to inspect it simultaneously alongside a number of other single centres in the same locality.

**SureStart\_On:** the main source of information for scheduling is the SureStart\_On database managed on behalf of the Department for Education.

**Target groups:** refer to the groups and families the centre identifies as having needs or circumstances that require particularly perceptive intervention and/or additional support. The following list is not exhaustive and does not imply that young children or families in any of these categories require additional support. The target groups will vary according to the centre's identification of its community and their needs but in any particular centre may include:

- lone parents, teenage mothers and pregnant teenagers
- children from low income backgrounds
- children living with domestic abuse, adult mental health issues and substance abuse
- children 'in need' or with a child protection plan
- children of offenders and/ or those in custody
- fathers, particularly those with any other identified need, for example, teenage fathers and those in custody
- those with protected characteristics,<sup>23</sup> as defined by the Equality Act 2010
- adopted children and adopter families
- children who are in the care of the local authority (looked after children)
- children who are being cared for by members of their extended family such as a grandparent, aunt or older sibling
- families identified by the local authority as 'troubled families' who have children under five
- families who move into and out of the area relatively quickly (transient families), such as asylum seekers, armed forces personnel and those who move into the area seeking employment or taking up seasonal work

---

<sup>23</sup> Children and families with protected characteristics may include: those for whom English is an additional language; those from minority ethnic groups; those from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families; those from lesbian, gay and transgender families.

- any other vulnerable groups or individual families including those young children and families identified as at risk of harm by other services – such as adult social care, schools, police and health services.

**Tracking:** the actions and strategies that leaders and managers employ to monitor the effectiveness and impact of a centre's work. For example this may include using local data/compiling centre data that identifies the number of families living in the local area, using the centre, attendance at activities and follow up monitoring of children and adults to determine whether there has been any longer term impact of their engagement with the centre.

**Two-year-old progress check:** a short written summary of a child's development in the three prime learning and development areas of the Early Years Foundation Stage. It must identify the child's strengths and any areas where the child may have developmental delay including the strategies and activities needed to address the concerns.

**Universal services:** services that are available to all families in an area who wish to use them.

**Wider community:** refers to all families in the reach area, including those who may not use the centre or benefit from its services.

**Young children:** refers to children aged under five years.

## Annex B. Sources of evidence

This guidance is not exhaustive but it is intended to direct inspectors to the range and types of qualitative and quantitative evidence that centres should make available for them to form a view on, no matter what the configuration of children's centres might be.

Types of evidence may include:

- opportunities to assess the quality of practice and services through direct observations
- discussions with parents and children, practitioners, service leaders/managers and partners
- documentation and records of:
  - commissioning arrangements, protocols and service level agreements and working arrangements with key partners/agencies
  - individual case planning/ studies; records of the centre's specific interventions; monitoring and review of plans; tailoring of individual activities in response to identified needs
  - policies and procedures, including those relating to any statutory requirements (for example for safeguarding)
  - levels of parental satisfaction as shown through the centre's satisfaction surveys
  - notes of meetings or focus groups (for example minutes of meetings including joint management meetings, the advisory board, parents forums and meetings with the local authority)
  - quality improvement arrangements including self-evaluation and action planning (including any action planning in relation to any previous Ofsted inspections).
- data and performance monitoring information showing:
  - the total number of families with young children living in the centre or centre group area
  - the percentage of families with children under five years living in the area who are registered with the children's centre or another centre
  - the percentage of families with children under five years living in the area who are identified as being in most need of help and support and who have sustained appropriate levels of engagement/contact with the centre
  - an analysis of participation rates, attendance levels and reach of services
  - the percentage of children taking up funded early education places, including those in target groups, and in particular take up of places for disadvantaged two-year-olds, in provision that is judged as good or outstanding

- any evidence of outcomes from two-year-old assessments where these are in place
- the percentage of children from target groups who achieve good levels of development in the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile
- the percentage of parents from target groups completing parenting or other identified programmes including those designed to safeguard children
- the percentage of parents from target groups who complete training or education programmes
- the percentage of parents from target groups engaged in activities or programmes that raise aspirations and improve their chances of gaining employment
- any evidence showing whether parents enter employment as a direct result of completing education and training programmes and whether this employment has been sustained over time
- take up rates for advice and guidance/other activities aimed at improving economic wellbeing such as debt counselling
- the percentage of children being breastfed at six to eight weeks and sustained over time
- the percentage of children in the reception year who are a healthy weight
- evidence from health data and the take up of other services promoting healthy lifestyles for example smoking cessation and substance misuse.

## Annex C. Expressing proportions in words

| Proportion | Description                              |
|------------|------------------------------------------|
| 97–100%    | Vast/overwhelming majority or almost all |
| 80–96%     | Very large majority, most                |
| 65–79%     | Large majority                           |
| 51–64%     | Majority                                 |
| 35–49%     | Minority                                 |
| 20–34%     | Small minority                           |
| 4–19%      | Very small minority, few                 |
| 0–3%       | Almost no/very few                       |