

# Inspection report for Highfield Road Children's Centre

Local authority	Northamptonshire
Inspection number	365796
Inspection dates	10–11 February 2011
Reporting inspector	Graham Sims AI

Centre governance	The local authority
Centre leader	Anne Bridgstock
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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Linked school if applicable	Greenfields Community Primary School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	N/A

The inspection of this Sure Start Children's Centre was carried out under Part 3A of the Childcare Act 2006 as inserted by section 199 of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009.

## Introduction

The inspection addresses the centre's contribution to:

- facilitating access to early childhood services by parents, prospective parents and young children
- maximising the benefit of those services to parents, prospective parents and young children
- improving the well-being of young children.

The report is made to the local authority and a copy is sent to the children's centre. The local authority may send the report to such persons it considers appropriate and must arrange for an action plan to be produced in relation to the findings in this report.

This inspection was carried out by two additional inspectors.

The inspectors held meetings with the centre's manager and staff, representatives from the local authority, members of the advisory board, the chair of the parents' input group, various professionals who work in partnership with the centre, parents and users of the centre. They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

## Information about the centre

Highfield Road Children's Centre was designated as a phase two children's centre in March 2008. It started a limited service in January 2009, opened officially in April 2009 and achieved full core offer in October 2009. It is situated in an old school dining room, which has been extended and renovated, on the site of Greenfields Primary School. The centre has limited facilities, comprising a main room, a small meeting room, a reception area, and two small offices, one of which is also used as a consultation room. The centre occupies its premises on the understanding that it rents its main room to a privately run pre-school, Little Angels, each morning. However, the centre does not contract the pre-school to run any services and does not refer children to it. The centre uses three other outreach venues for some of its services. Integrated childcare is not part of the centre's core offer. The centre refers children to a range of nurseries and childcare provision, and provides crèche facilities in the afternoon for parents and carers attending courses or consultations at the centre. The centre runs a broad range of events for its users. It runs joint activities with and refers users to a wide range of partners. The centre manager is answerable to the local authority for the running of the centre. The linked school has no responsibility in relation to the management or the outcomes of the centre. The centre receives the advice and guidance of a local advisory board. At the time of the inspection, the centre had been without the services of its deputy manager for a number of months because of long-term illness.

The centre's reach area covers the wards of St Peters, and St Michaels and Wicksteed in Kettering. Over the whole of the reach area, the proportion of children in workless households and the proportion of families receiving benefits are below the national average. However, there is significant deprivation in three of the super output areas within the vicinity of the centre, where unemployment and the proportion of families on workless benefits are above average. Although the large majority of families in the area are from White British backgrounds, the proportion from other heritages is increasing, resulting in a culturally diverse community with no predominant minority ethnic group. Evidence indicates that the skills and knowledge with which children enter the local Early Years Foundation Stage settings are broadly average for the whole of the reach area, but are below average for children in the immediate vicinity of the centre.

## Inspection judgements

**Grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate**

### Overall effectiveness

**The effectiveness of the children’s centre in meeting the needs of and improving outcomes for users and the wider community**

2

### Capacity for sustained improvement

**The centre’s capacity for sustained improvement, including the quality of its leadership and management**

2

## Main findings

Highfield Road Children’s Centre is having a significant impact on the lives of children and families within the reach area and is described by users as being ‘the hub of the local community’. The comments of users attending the sessions and of those interviewed during the inspection were unfailingly positive. For many people, the centre has become their first port of call to seek advice or help on parenting, health and social issues. Parents and carers really value the opportunities to meet others, to make new friends and to improve their skills through the courses and activities offered by the centre.

The success of the centre is down to the passionate leadership of the centre manager and the dedication of the small but highly professional and caring team of staff. The staff have been highly successful in winning the confidence of parents and carers through their patience, understanding and supportiveness. Users have every confidence in the staff and are the best advertisement for the centre as they encourage their friends to visit the centre. The staff know the children and families who attend the centre really well and are astute at assessing their needs and pointing them in the right direction, whether it be attendance at one of the many activities facilitated by the centre or referral to other professionals. This knowledge of users’ needs has led to successful adaptation and tailoring of the centre’s services, so that there is a good range of longer-term and one-off courses and activities which are effective and meet the needs of the area well.

Good partnerships with a wide range of professionals are having a positive impact on the health and safety of children and their families. The centre’s main sessions, ‘Stay and Play’ and ‘Positively Blooming’, have input from midwives, health visitors and other professionals. Parents and carers, therefore, not only learn new parenting skills through the well-led sessions, but have the opportunity to consult experts on health-related issues or to seek advice about their personal circumstances. Safeguarding procedures are rigorous and close attention is given to all aspects of safety. As a result, users and children develop their own awareness of safety issues well.

Governance arrangements are good, and users have the opportunity to contribute to decision-making and to shape the centre's services through participation in the 'parent input group', one member of which represents the group on the advisory board. Equality of opportunity is good, as staff are keen to involve everyone, show no favouritism or discrimination, try hard to reach the vulnerable, and listen to and act upon the views of users.

The centre has come a long way in a short time, but is aware that there is room for further development as it seeks to have an even greater impact on the community. The centre is rigorous in evaluating the effectiveness of what it offers to users, but has not yet set itself targets or developed a clear longer-term strategic development plan to map out the future direction of the centre. It has been highly successful in increasing the number of users, including those in vulnerable circumstances, who benefit from its services, but is aware that there are still families with whom they have yet to establish contact. It collects and evaluates data from a wide range of sources but, largely for reasons outside its control, it still lacks important data to enable it to have an even better understanding of its reach area. The centre has been instrumental in improving the life chances and employment opportunities for some adults, but the number of people who have been helped in this way is small. However, the way the centre has evolved, listened to and perceived the needs of the local community, tried out new ideas, adapted its services, developed the skills of staff and won the confidence of users indicates that there is good capacity for further improvement.

## **What does the centre need to do to improve further?**

### **Recommendations for further improvement**

- Improve planning for the future by:
  - devising an easy-to-understand and user-friendly format for the centre's longer-term strategic development plan
  - setting challenging targets to meet the areas of greatest need within the reach area
  - communicating the centre's main development priorities to staff and professional partners.
- Extend the influence of the centre and its impact on those who are hard to reach and families who are made vulnerable by their circumstances by:
  - liaising with the health authorities and the local authority to obtain up-to-date relevant data about new births and those living in the reach area
  - analysing the data to identify the areas of greatest need and prioritising the centre's services to meet these needs.
- Provide support for more adults to progress to further employment, education or training by:
  - identifying those within the reach area who would benefit from such support
  - acting as the conduit for further professional support and training.

## How good are outcomes for users?

2

Sessions which are attended by parents, carers and their children and the crèche facilities organised by the centre are well run. Staff plan activities carefully in accordance with the Early Years Foundation Stage guidance and evaluate rigorously the progress of the children who attend. Children learn well on these occasions, but the lack of daily contact means that the centre is unable to have the same impact on children's learning which is possible through full-time or daily attendance at another setting. The centre's major impact on the lives of children comes through improving the skills, knowledge and understanding of their parents and carers.

Being healthy outcomes for young children and their families are good and improving. Available statistics are encouraging. The proportion of obese children within the centre's area is just below the national average, and the proportion of mothers who breastfeed their babies is just above average. Regular attendance at the centre's main sessions by a midwife and health visitor is a key factor in helping users and their children to develop healthy lifestyles. Occasional input from other professionals, such as a health trainer and dental hygienist, also have a beneficial impact. Baby massage courses have helped to improve the self-esteem of parents and the way they bond with their babies. After initial difficulties, parents and carers accept the centre's stance on healthy foods and are now more willing to allow their children to try different foods. The 'dads' football' activity has been exceptionally successful, not only in improving the health of the fathers and children who take part, but also having a significant impact on the emotional well-being of the fathers who participate.

The centre makes a good contribution to the safety and protection of children through its procedures within the centre and the education it provides for adults. Informed by careful risk assessments, staff make parents aware of their role in keeping their children safe while in the centre. Special events, such as a 'Keeping Children Safe' week, first aid courses for families and home safety checks successfully raise parents' and carers' awareness of dangers and how to keep themselves safe. The centre's safeguarding procedures are good. Individual case studies show how the centre has been instrumental in supporting parents and children whose safety is endangered, for example, through domestic abuse. The centre places a high priority in securing support for children subject to a child protection plan and cooperates well with other agencies in assessing children subject to the Common Assessment Framework. Parents speak highly of the support they receive, a typical comment being, 'The centre has made me feel more confident.'

That users enjoy what the centre has to offer is very much in evidence from the reactions of parents and carers, and from the smiles and engagement of the children. 'We like it here, it's fun!' 'The centre has been brilliant. There aren't many places a dad can feel as welcome as here.' These comments, the first from a child, the second from a father, indicate that the centre's appeal is wide ranging. Users achieve well in their personal and social development. Through 'Stay and Play', parents learn how to help their children learn through educational play activities.

Through 'Messy Play', they explore and experiment in ways which many parents would not have thought of initiating themselves. Family learning courses and one-off activities, such as cooking or buggy walks, extend their horizons. The friendly welcome from staff draws in those who have been hard to engage and encourages them to participate. The 'dads' football', for example, has been spectacularly successful, where previous attempts to engage this group had been only moderately successful. As a result, a number of fathers have gained football coaching qualifications and the involvement of so many fathers and children has had an enormously beneficial social impact.

Users comment on how much the centre has helped to improve social relationships within the community. Children's behaviour within the centre is good, and positive relationships, fostered by the friendly staff, are very much in evidence in the centre's activities. Users make a positive contribution to the centre through voicing their views and their participation in the 'parent input group', which feeds in their views to the advisory board. Users' suggestions have helped to shape the centre's activities. A 'Friends of Highfield' group has just been established to help ensure future sustainability of the centre. The centre has become a major force to promote community cohesion within the locality.

Through its various activities, the centre is helping children to become active, inquisitive and independent learners and is helping parents and carers to learn how they can foster such skills at home. The centre can demonstrate success in helping individuals to engage in training or other opportunities to help them back into employment. For example, through participating as volunteers, two parents have recently gained employment. Partnerships with other bodies have provided opportunities for adults to develop their understanding of budgeting and have supported adults facing bankruptcy. The centre has facilitated literacy, numeracy and basic skills courses. Currently, however, the number of adults benefiting from such support is small and the centre is not having as much impact on developing economic stability and independence as it is on users' social development and their understanding of health, safety and parenting skills.

*These are the grades for the outcomes for users*

<b>The extent to which children, including those from vulnerable groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which all users enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships and users contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents are developing economic stability and independence including</b>	<b>3</b>

## How good is the provision?

2
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Families' needs are assessed sensitively when they first come to the centre. These assessments are then used effectively to direct users to the most appropriate services or activities. The centre responds quickly to referrals from outside agencies. Good relationships with healthcare professionals attending the centre ensure accurate and helpful assessment of users' health needs. Staff evaluate the effectiveness of every activity and use their evaluations to accommodate the changing needs of the group for future sessions. The centre links well with other professionals to carry out assessments under the Common Assessment Framework. Staff are making an increasing number of home visits jointly with health visitors. These visits provide a valuable first introduction to the centre and are helping the centre to ascertain the needs of those who do not yet engage with the centre.

The initial assessments, on-going evaluations and constant dialogue with users provide the basis for the good care, guidance and support provided by the staff at the centre. Parents are full of praise for the welcoming atmosphere and the support provided by the staff. They appreciate being able to access professional support within a non-threatening environment. One father, for example, said, 'Until I came here, I felt threatened and unsupported by agencies around me.' The good level of care is demonstrated through the way the centre provides crèche facilities for children, whenever required, to enable parents to attend consultations or participate in a course. The centre is at its most effective in dealing with families in crisis when staff provide personal and trusted contact for the families and use their knowledge to refer families to the most relevant professional support to meet their needs.

The centre promotes learning well. Activities are planned well, taking into consideration previous evaluations and bearing in mind the needs of those who attend, and they are of good quality. Achievement is celebrated well through displays of children's work, certificates for those who attend courses and plenty of photographic evidence. The centre's mainstay sessions always seek to enhance the interaction of parents and carers with their children. Even though they currently only involve a small number of people, the centre has shown that its involvement enables users to improve their educational development, to be involved with further training and to progress to employment.

In many ways, the range of services provided is good. Services are adapted to meet the needs of users and are based on a good analysis of needs. There is something for everyone who comes to the centre. Participation rates for the most popular activities are constantly increasing. However, attendance rates for activities to help workless people back into employment are low. There are still some hard-to-reach groups who are not being supported by the centre's activities. This is partly because the available data are not sophisticated enough to enable the centre to identify which



these groups are. It is also a reflection of the fact that outreach visits are not yet made to all families after a child has been born.

*These are the grades for the quality of provision*

<b>The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all users</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of users and the wider community</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The quality of care, guidance and support offered to users within the centre and the wider community</b>	<b>2</b>

## **How effective are the leadership and management?**

<b>2</b>
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Governance and accountability arrangements are clear and understood. The local authority maintains proper oversight of the centre by meeting regularly with the centre manager. The advisory board is playing an increasingly influential role in the affairs of the centre. It has recently streamlined its meetings to provide greater focus in discussion and fuller involvement of its members, who represent the interests of health visitors, the local council, Jobcentre Plus, childminders, other professionals and users of the centre. The centre is managed well on a day-to-day basis. Regular training has enhanced the expertise of staff and enabled them to carry on functioning effectively despite the absence of the deputy centre manager for an extended period. As well as the stringent controls put in place by the local authority, the centre has good oversight of its financial affairs and is constantly evaluating the cost-effectiveness of its services. Facilities are managed effectively and efficiently. As a result, and because of the good provision and good outcomes, the centre provides good value for money.

The centre has developed well under the energetic leadership of the centre manager and the good contribution of all staff, whatever their levels of responsibility. Short-term developments, influenced by on-going self-evaluation, have been managed well. They have led to significant improvement in the services offered by the centre and a steadily increasing number of users within the reach area. There is an undoubted drive and ambition to continue improving the services which the centre offers to the community. The centre has high expectations with regard to the performance of staff and to the development of children and their families. The centre's self-evaluation is accurate and perceptive, and provides many ideas as to how the centre can improve its effectiveness. However, these ideas are not prioritised and have not been drawn together in a long-term strategic development plan with clear and ambitious targets for improvement. Some aspects of forward planning are hampered by a lack of data which is specific to the reach area. The centre manager has been working together with the local authority and other centre managers on the implementation of a new information system which should

significantly improve the centre's access to data, but it has yet to be implemented.

Safeguarding arrangements are good. All staff have received training on safeguarding and child protection issues. Recruitment checks are rigorous and all relevant information is recorded in meticulous detail and held securely. Close working partnerships with a wide range of professionals help to ensure that relevant information is shared in order to provide the best service for users and full support for any children who have child protection plans. Risk assessments are thorough. The centre has been meticulous in dealing with a potential security issues and has been vigorous in pursuing improvements to mitigate any possible risk to children, staff and users. The centre is strongly committed to equality of opportunity by supporting children and families whatever their cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Staff treat everyone with respect. Immigrant parents comment on how helpful the centre has been to them.

*These are the grades for leadership and management*

<b>The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day to day management arrangements are clear and understood</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which ambitious targets drive improvement, provision is integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of users and the wider community</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which evaluation is used to shape and improve services and activities</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services the centre has been commissioned to provide</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which the centre supports and encourages the wider community to engage with services and uses their views to develop the range of provision</b>	<b>2</b>

## **Any other information used to inform the judgements made during this inspection**

The inspection team held discussions with the lead inspectors who were conducting concurrent inspections of all providers situated on the site of Greenfields Community Primary School. The skills shown by children entering the Early Years Foundation Stage at Greenfields Community Primary School are below those expected for children of their age. Outcomes and provision were judged to be satisfactory.

Outcomes, provision and leadership at Little Angels, the pre-school which rents the children's centre's main hall each morning, were judged to be inadequate. The children's centre does not refer children to this pre-school, although a number of parents who live close to the centre choose to send their children to Little Angels because it is close to where they live.

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## Summary for centre users

We inspected the Highfield Road Children's Centre on 10–11 February 2011. We judged the centre as good overall.

We really appreciated the opportunity to talk to a number of you during the inspection. You made it very clear to us that you really value all that the centre does for you. One person described the centre as a 'lifeline'. Another told us how it was really good to 'have a place where men can go without feeling threatened'. And yet another said that they felt 'the centre is now the hub of the community'. You all commented on how friendly and helpful the centre's staff are. We certainly came away with the same impression.

The centre is undoubtedly having a positive impact on the local community and helping to improve the quality of your lives and those of your children. There is a good working partnership with a wide range of professionals, and you particularly appreciate the opportunity to consult with some of them when you attend sessions like 'Stay and Play' or 'Positively Blooming'. These opportunities help you to improve the health and safety of you and your families. The centre plans its activities well and provides good opportunities for you to learn alongside your children or to develop new skills that help you with the difficult task of parenting. 'Baby Massage' sessions and 'Messy Play' have taught many of you new skills and activities to undertake with your children.

We were particularly impressed with the way the centre has been instrumental in engaging fathers. The 'dads' football' team has proved to be a huge success. It has not only helped to improve the fitness of those who take part, but it has had a really positive impact in improving people's self-esteem and in getting families within the community to work together. One member of the group gave a very moving account of how effective this activity has been and how it has also encouraged fathers to engage with the centre.

The centre is led and managed well. The staff are totally dedicated to supporting you and your families and they work together very effectively as a team. They provide good care, support and guidance, particularly for those of you who are going through difficult times. They look after your children well when you attend meetings or activities at the centre, and they know just the right people to help you if they are unable to do so themselves. It is good to see that there is an opportunity for you to voice your opinions through the 'parent input group' and to influence the services which the centre provides for you.

The centre has come a long way in a short time, but the staff want it to be even better than it is so that they provide the very best possible service for the local community. In order to help it to improve further we have suggested that the staff look at all of the ideas they have identified to develop the centre in the future and place these in order of importance. It would be helpful for them to set some realistic targets and set out their actions in an easy-to-understand development plan. There

are still some families in your area who have no contact with the centre, so we have asked the staff to look at ways of reaching these people. One way would be to ensure that they receive up-to-date data and information from the local authority so that they have a really good understanding of the needs of the community. The centre has helped a number of you to gain further skills and qualifications, and this has helped a few of you get back into employment. We have asked the centre to increase its activities in this area.

With all that has been achieved since the centre opened in 2009, we are confident that the centre will continue to develop well. We trust that you continue to enjoy attending the centre and that the centre continues to provide a source of help to you and your families.

The full report is available from your centre or on our website [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk).