

Inspection report for Histon Children's Centre

Local authority	Cambridgeshire
Inspection number	365798
Inspection dates	8–9 March 2011
Reporting inspector	Graham Sims AI

Centre governance	The governing body of Histon Early Years Centre
Centre leader	Lee Robertson
Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
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Linked school if applicable	Histon Early Years Centre
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Little Owls Day Care

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 an additional inspector and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the head of centre, the senior management team, other staff who work at the centre, members of the governing body and the advisory board, users of the centre, and a wide range of professionals and other partners who work with the centre. They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

Histon Children's Centre is a phase one children's centre which opened in 2005 to provide the full core offer. It is located on the site of Histon Early Years Centre which comprises a nursery school funded by the local authority, the Little Owls day-care provision and the children's centre. The local authority has delegated responsibility for governance of the children's centre to the governing body of Histon Early Years Centre. The governing body receives advice and guidance from an advisory board, which has recently been established and which comprises representatives from various partners and users of the centre.

The head of centre is responsible for leading and managing the nursery, day-care provision and the children's centre, all of which operate as a tightly integrated unit offering a full range of services. These include day-care provision for children aged two to four, nursery provision for three- and four-year-olds, various sessions for parents, carers and their children, and a wide range of groups, meetings and one-to-one sessions to meet the needs of users. Some of the centre's services operate from other premises within the centre's reach area. A number of privately run playgroups operate within the reach area.

Since its original establishment to cater for an area of high deprivation, the centre's reach area has been redefined and now only contains small pockets of deprivation. The reach area comprises the villages of Cottenham, Girton, Histon and Impington, Oakington and Rampton. Most children come from owner-occupied homes where, frequently, both parents are in employment. There are some single-parent families, some families on low income, some families for whom English is not their first language and a significant Irish Traveller community. The vast majority of the catchment area is White British. There is some transience, as some families from other countries live in the area for only a short time. Evidence indicates that the skills and knowledge with which children enter the local Early Years Foundation Stage settings are above those expected nationally for their age.

The Histon Early Years Centre has recently had its Quality Mark re-awarded and has Health Promoting School status. The centre was subject to a pilot inspection in June 2009, but the results of this inspection were not published.

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

Those who use the services provided by Histon Children’s Centre are full of praise for the supportiveness of the centre’s staff and the quality of the activities provided. One parent, echoing the comments of other users, wrote: ‘This is by far the best children’s centre I have been to. It is safe and welcoming and there are always well-planned and varied activities.’ All of the activities for parents, carers and children which were observed during the inspection were of high quality. Staff are caring, knowledgeable and passionate in their desire to support families and promote children’s development. The whole ethos of the centre speaks of creativity, imagination, interest and a world of discovery and excitement, which absorbs the interest of young children. The centre is able to refer parents to day-care and nursery provision which is located within the same building as the children’s centre and which was judged to be outstanding when last inspected. This all-embracing provision and the outstanding way in which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment enable children to achieve exceptionally well and with great enjoyment. The centre’s emphasis on healthy lifestyles and its strong and improving links with healthcare professionals ensure that there is a constant emphasis on health-related matters in all of the centre’s activities. This results in healthy outcomes for users either being maintained at a high level or continuing to improve.

The centre is intent on providing equality of opportunity for all. Through prioritised access to day-care and nursery facilities, it provides well for disabled children and those with a particular need. It has yet to prove, however, that the excellence of some of what it does is having an impact throughout the reach area or that the needs of all children and families are being met through the activities which are offered. For these reasons, the inspection judges the overall provision and outcomes for users to be good. The centre has worked hard to identify groups within its area which are hard to reach and has been highly successful in engaging some of these groups. The centre’s work with the Travelling community, for example, is used by the local authority as an exemplar of best practice. Staff have been imaginative and tenacious in their efforts to reach into a new housing area which is devoid of

community facilities. However, lack of data from the local authority and other sources, and an outreach programme which is limited by the availability of staff to conduct home visits, mean that the centre does not have a full range of information to ensure that it is meeting the most pressing needs within its reach area.

Despite this, there is still a wide range of well-organised and helpful events which have a very positive impact on many families. One parent, for example, said that the group she attended was 'a complete lifeline'. In all of the centre's work, there is a strong emphasis on safety, from the recruitment of staff, through assessment of risks to the development of users' awareness of safe practices. The centre takes note of what its users have to say about the centre's activities, and will adapt them to meet the needs of those who attend. The centre's self-evaluation is somewhat less rigorous. Imaginative and exciting ideas for future development are not underpinned by a careful and systematic analysis of the impact which the centre is having on the outcomes for its users. The development plan is broad in its scope, but lacks prioritised and focused areas for development. Nevertheless, the quality of what the centre offers, the passionate commitment of the staff and the excellent drive of the centre's leaders to work in partnership with a wide range of professionals demonstrate that there is good capacity for further improvement.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Improve the use of data as a tool for identifying areas of greatest need within the reach area by:
 - working closely with the local authority and other partner organisations to obtain relevant, accurate and up-to-date data about children and families within the reach area
 - extending the amount of outreach work to get to know more families within the reach area and as a means of gathering data which is not available from other sources
 - collating and analysing data from a range of sources in order to develop an even deeper understanding of the reach area.

- Improve the centre's procedures for self-evaluation and development planning to ensure that the centre meets the most pressing needs and reaches all of the most vulnerable and hard-to-reach groups within the reach area by:
 - rigorously evaluating all aspects of the centre's performance
 - clearly identifying the impact which the centre's work has on the outcomes for all users
 - analysing the centre's own evaluations and the available data to determine future priorities for development.

How good are outcomes for users?

2

The development of healthy lifestyles and the educational development and achievement of young children are real strengths of the centre. The centre's wide-ranging and persistent emphasis on aspects of health is having a very positive impact on the physical, mental and emotional health of families and their children. One mother, for example, wrote in glowing terms about how the centre had helped her solve physical problems, increase her social confidence and improve relationships within the family. The unstinting work of the senior family worker has helped people from hard-to-reach communities access health services. Antenatal and postnatal support, the availability of midwifery and health visitor services at the centre, visits from an ophthalmologist and a physiotherapist all contribute significantly to improving healthy outcomes. Healthy eating initiatives are promoted to reduce poor eating habits, and the low proportion of obese children within the reach area indicates good parental awareness of children's health needs. Healthy snacks, well-balanced diets, provision for rest and sleep during the day and plenty of outdoor activity for children attending nursery and day care promote really healthy lifestyles. The centre has also supported a number of families to access smoking cessation programmes.

No parent or carer who brings a child to the centre, whether to the nursery, day-care provision or to one of the many sessions for parents, carers and their children, can escape the very strong emphasis on promoting learning and development through play. Sessions are imaginative, well planned and well resourced, and cover all of the areas of learning outlined in the Early Years Foundation Stage guidance. Staff are very good at helping, supporting and extending children's development and skills, and children are totally absorbed in their activities. As a result, children enter full-time education with skills that are above those expected for their age. The last three years have seen a significant rise in levels of achievement at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage in the setting to which most of the children who attend the centre go when they start school. Courses provided for parents, carers and children are of high quality and help adults to develop their understanding of child development and improve their parenting skills.

There are very good outcomes in outcome areas. Behaviour in and around the centre is excellent. Children and adults using services at the centre are effectively safeguarded. Case studies show that individuals who are referred to the centre or who approach the centre for help are enabled to make significant improvements in their lives. Relationships within the centre are respectful and adults feel the centre makes a very important contribution to the community. The centre has developed an excellent rapport with some members of the local Traveller community, who are beginning to access some of the centre's services as a result.

The reason why outcomes are not outstanding overall is because the centre is unable to demonstrate that it has a full knowledge of all of the needs within its reach area. For example, the centre is aware of a very small number of families where English is not the main language. Other sources indicate that there are more families than this,

for whom the centre does not facilitate support. While the level of unemployment is much less than in many areas nationally, the centre is unable to quantify the level of need. Thus, it does not identify where it might make an impact on helping those most in need to improve their economic stability and independence. The centre cooperates well with other authorities and provides good support for families and children who are referred to them for support. At present, there are no children known to the centre who have a child protection plan and very few have been subject to common assessment framework processes. The centre seeks the views of users whenever possible, and some users are involved as members of the advisory board. This group, however, is only just beginning to establish its role as part of the governance of the centre. Therefore, users have not yet had a great input into the overall evaluation of the centre's effectiveness or decision-making processes.

These are the grades for the outcomes for users

The extent to which children, including those from vulnerable groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles	1
The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	2
The extent to which all users enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	1
The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships and users contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	2
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents are developing economic stability and independence including access to training	2

How good is the provision?

2

The centre is very good at listening to those who come to it for help. As a result, parents and carers develop the confidence to share their concerns. They feel that they are supported well by the staff, who develop a good understanding of the needs of those who attend. Services are then tailored well to meet the needs of these users. The assessment of children who attend nursery or day-care provision is extremely thorough, and detailed 'learning journeys' are built up for each child. The assessment of the wider needs of the reach area is hampered by lack of easily available data. Although staff have tried hard to find out as much as they can about their reach area, for example, through attendance at community events, a detailed analysis of the needs of the area is still incomplete. As a result, the centre is unable to demonstrate with certainty that it has identified and is meeting the most pressing needs within the community or reaching all of the most vulnerable groups.

Nevertheless, the centre uses the information it has to provide some high-quality

services for parents, carers and their children. Users' evaluations of the activities they attend are highly positive and indicate that they are making an important contribution to their learning. For example, one parent wrote on her evaluation: 'I hoped that I would gain some useful behaviour management techniques from this class, but what I ended up gaining was actually much more important. I have learnt to make small subtle changes to my own approach and perception, and my relationship with my son has greatly improved.' This indicates that staff have a very good insight into how best to help parents and carers. Provision to help children to learn and develop is outstanding. Their achievements are celebrated and encouraged throughout the day by highly supportive staff, whose exuberance also acts as a spur and encouragement to adult users.

The centre offers a wide range of services which are highly relevant to the users who attend. Regular sessions, such as 'Bumps to Babies' and 'Ready, Steady, Play' cater well for mothers before and after birth and into the early years of their children's development. A group for fathers, held on a Saturday morning as the most convenient time for them, is greatly appreciated. Since its pilot inspection, the centre has increased the range of activities provided in some of the outlying villages. However, these events do not always attract users from the locality in which they are held and attendance levels vary. The centre signposts users to other providers when appropriate. For example, there is a good working relationship with another children's centre which specialises in working with teenage parents. In turn, the centre offers its expertise in working with the Traveller community to other organisations.

The centre provides sensitive, well-informed, high-quality care for young children and adult users who attend the centre. Staff often go well beyond the call of duty to help individuals or families in need. Painstaking work with the Travelling community has gained a level of trust which is not easily won. Case studies show that the centre's work and the supportiveness of the staff have made a real impact on the lives of some individuals and their families. The staff are passionate about their work and have a real desire to make a difference within the local community. Although the centre works closely with the local authority's home visiting team, the centre's own outreach programme of home visits is somewhat limited. It has been hampered by long-term staff absence and the withdrawal of information from other services about new births within the reach area.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users	2
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all users	1
The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of users and the wider community	2
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to users within the centre and the wider community	2

How effective are the leadership and management?

2

Governance and accountability arrangements, and the contractual and service-level agreements between partners are clear. The centre is managed well on a day-to-day basis. Leaders have a good understanding of their various roles and work well together. Governance has been strengthened by the developing role of the advisory board whose members provide wide-ranging expertise and include users of the centre. In addition, parents and carers have an opportunity to contribute their views on the extent and range of the centre's services through a 'parents forum'. The centre's resources are managed well, and prudent saving has placed the centre in a position where it is able to acquire a vehicle which will be used to transport resources and its toy library to the more remote parts of the reach area. The centre provides good value for money.

Safeguarding procedures are good. Procedures to check the suitability of all adults who might come into contact with children are thorough. Risk assessments are carried out for all of the centre's activities. There is a strong emphasis on safety in the groups and activities provided for users. The centre cooperates with other agencies, although there have been very few referrals under the Common Assessment Framework. Users experiencing difficulties receive sensitive and caring support from the staff at the centre.

Equality and diversity are promoted and celebrated effectively within the centre through a wide range of activities which bring users from different backgrounds together in the common pursuit of caring for their children and families. The centre's work with the Traveller community has been a particular focus, and the centre's expertise in this area has been recognised and used to help other organisations extend their work with this community. Over the last 18 months, the centre has increased the number of outlying venues where activities take place in order to provide greater accessibility to the centre's services for those who do not live near the centre. Staff have worked hard to develop their knowledge of the reach area, but there is a lack of available data. The withdrawal of information which was previously provided on new births within the area and a limited programme of home visits mean that the centre cannot be certain that it is identifying all of the most vulnerable and hard-to-reach groups within the area.

The centre's leaders are passionate about what they do and have a high level of professional expertise. They set high standards for themselves and for the quality of the services which they provide. The work of the nursery, the Little Owls day care and the children's centre is fully integrated. The leaders seek every opportunity to work in partnership with other professionals and organisations, thus significantly extending the range of expertise available to users. A previously arranged partnership lunch which took place on the first day of the inspection indicates that the centre is rigorous in pursuing whatever avenues it can to work with others. The presence of a midwife and health visitor at a number of the centre's activities has

proved to be very successful, and this provision is to be extended in the near future. Whenever possible, the centre seeks the views of users to inform its planning, but the centre's own self-evaluation is far from complete. What has been completed identifies what the centre does, but not what impact this is having on the outcomes for children and users of the centre. There are imaginative ideas for future development, but these are not always based on a careful analysis of data and the centre's own evaluations. They do not necessarily, therefore, coincide with the most pressing needs within the reach area. The development plan is broad in its scope, but does not have clearly identified priorities which are known and understood by the staff.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day to day management arrangements are clear and understood	2
The extent to which ambitious targets drive improvement, provision is integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community	2
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of users and the wider community	2
The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties	2
The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults	2
The extent to which evaluation is used to shape and improve services and activities	3
The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services the centre has been commissioned to provide	1
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	2

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

The inspection team took into consideration the findings of the most recent inspection report for Histon Early Years Centre, which looked at the work of the maintained nursery and the Little Owls day-care provision. Outcomes, provision and leadership were judged to be outstanding in both settings.

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance 'Complaining about inspections', which is available from our website: www.ofsted.gov.uk. If you would like us to send you a copy of the guidance, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

Summary for centre users

We inspected the Histon Children's Centre on 8–9 March 2011. We judged the centre as good overall.

We should like to thank those of you to whom we spoke during the inspection for helping us to understand the impact which the centre has on you as users. We came away with a very clear impression that you really appreciate the work of the centre. One of the evaluations we read said, "Bumps to Babies" in Girton is one of the real highlights of my week.' Another talked in glowing terms of the one-to-one support received, others of the way they had been made to feel welcome in the centre. You clearly value the many events which take place at the centre and other venues, the centre's guest speakers and the opportunities to consult with a range of professionals who attend the centre's events. It is clear that the centre has had a positive impact on helping many of you to develop a better understanding of your children's developmental needs.

Much of what the centre does is of high quality. There is a very strong emphasis on helping you and your children develop healthy lifestyles. This is seen very clearly in the provision of healthy snacks, balanced diets, outdoor play and opportunities for rest for children who attend Little Owls or the nursery. There is also plenty of opportunity for you to consult a variety of health professionals, some of whom have a regular input into many of the sessions which you attend. The centre has an excellent impact on the learning and development of your children. Staff are creative and imaginative in their planning of activities for the children. They stimulate learning by asking good questions and through their own enthusiasm. The activities and resources provided for the sessions which you attend are of high quality. The centre has good procedures to ensure the safety of your children and all who visit or work at the centre by carrying out the necessary checks on adults who come into contact with children. Risk assessments are undertaken for all activities. The centre values your input. It is always encouraging for staff to read your positive comments, but even more helpful when you take the trouble to outline clearly what works well and what you feel could be improved.

Those of you who use the centre are very pleased with what it has to offer. Staff at the centre have worked hard to identify those groups which are hardest to reach and those whose circumstances make them vulnerable, but the picture is not yet complete. We have, therefore, asked the centre to work closely with the local authority and other partners to obtain relevant, accurate and up-to-date data about the local area. We want them to then use these data to identify the areas of greatest need and determine the centre's priorities for development. We have also asked them to extend the amount of outreach work to ensure the centre contacts all of the most vulnerable and hard-to-reach groups within the area. There is already some really good work being undertaken with some groups, such as the Traveller community, and efforts have been made to reach families in villages which are some distance from the centre and areas where there are no other community facilities.

The centre is led and managed well. The staff have a passionate desire to help young children discover the joy of learning, and their enthusiasm communicates itself well in the sessions which they run for you as users of the centre. Those who attend the centre receive excellent support at times well beyond the call of duty. Those who are unaware of the centre's services or who have not yet been contacted by the centre miss out, therefore, on a valuable resource and a wide range of well-planned and interesting activities. The centre is very good at working with a wide range of professionals and fostering excellent partnerships which benefit users of the centre. Over the last year, the governance of the centre has been strengthened through the establishment of an advisory board which comprises professionals from a number of partner organisations as well as a number of parents. We have asked the centre to strengthen its processes for evaluating what it does and for identifying priorities for development which are focused on the areas of greatest need within the community. The quality of the services which the centre already provides and the commitment of the staff nevertheless demonstrate that there is good capacity for the centre to continue to improve.

The full report is available from your centre or on our website www.ofsted.gov.uk.