

# Inspection report for Firbank Children's Centre

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Local authority	Lancashire
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Linked school if applicable	Ridge Community Primary School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	EY432216 - Rising Stars Nursery

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.

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## 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 one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and one early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with leadership and management, staff, parents, representatives of the governing body, local authority and partner agencies. They observed the centre's work on site and in an outreach play support visit. Data, documentation and case studies were reviewed.

## Information about the centre

Firbank Children's Centre is located in the Ridge estate, adjacent to Ridge Community Primary School. The centre serves the communities of the Bulk, John O' Gaunt and parts of Scotforth East, in an area of variable affluence and deprivation. It was designated in 2006 as a phase two centre and delivers the full core offer. Three of its 14 super output areas are within the 30% most deprived in the country. Unemployment across Lancaster is low at 5.6%, compared to 8.2% nationally, and although data are unavailable for the reach area, the centre knows of 165 families in receipt of out-of-work benefits. The area is 98% White British heritage. Of the 74% of families actively engaged with the centre, 15% of these are from families in minority groups. There are approximately 1000 children under five years of age in the reach area, and 74% of their families are registered at the setting, of which 72% are actively engaged with centre services. Every local teenage mother is accessing centre services, as are 36% of fathers and 100% of all known families with children with additional needs.

The major challenges facing families in the reach area relate to long-term unemployment and poor physical and mental health. Most children enter early years provision with lower levels of skill, knowledge and understanding than those expected for their age. Governance is provided by the governing body of Ridge Community Primary School, which is commissioned by the local authority to deliver the children's centre services. A committee of the governing body is responsible for overseeing the centre's work. The headteacher is head of centre.

Childcare is provided on site by Rising Stars Nursery, which re-opened under new ownership on 12 August 2011. This was inspected under Section 49 of the Childcare Act 2006. The most current report is available from our website [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)

## 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 families**

2
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### Capacity for sustained improvement

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

2
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## Main findings

Firbank Children's Centre is an effective centre, described by one parent as 'a good place to come when you are feeling down, don't know where you are going or what you are doing – they help and encourage you'. Initially the centre mainly attracted parents from its more affluent areas, but in recent years it has refocused its priorities to better meet the needs of the most vulnerable groups in the reach area. It is delivering good value for money with strong financial oversight and management, ensuring that service delivery is always on budget.

Capacity to improve is good because leadership is dispersed among a strong team, who have complementary skills and a shared vision and commitment to improve outcomes, particularly for families who need the most help. The children's centre team recently won a local award for their capacity to react well to change. Their extremely caring, respectful attitudes and dedication to improving the lives of the most disadvantaged families is a seam of gold influencing all of this centre's work, inspiring loyalty, confidence and cooperation among professional partnerships and parents. Consequently, provision and outcomes are good.

The leadership team has highly-detailed local knowledge about their reach area. This enables them to target their improvement activity where it is most needed despite weaknesses in data from the local authority about the profile of needs in the reach area. Although the centre receives good support from the local authority, targets set by the authority lack precision. This limits how well the centre can measure its own progress and restricts how well the governance can hold the centre to account for its work. Parents' views are sought, valued and discussed, but the current governance arrangements do not sufficiently encourage less confident parents to take an active role in decision-making.

Health partners do not provide live birth data, despite regular petitioning at strategic level. This impacts upon the timeliness with which the centre can offer support and encouragement for the initiation of breastfeeding and other issues. However, there is evidence of the setting increasing the numbers of mothers who sustain breastfeeding by 15%.

The leadership team has put in place effective systems to measure the take-up of services by those in their priority target groups, which help to monitor equality of opportunity. They record the participation, completion and success rates of adult learners on their courses, and they track onward progression to further training, studying or volunteering opportunities. This information is also used to monitor equity of outcomes among target groups and is contributing well to building economic stability in the community.

Some schools in the reach area report that children using centre services enter Reception Year with higher levels of skill than those of their peers, and make better progress because they have had good preparation for the next steps in their learning. Outstanding, well-targeted home-based support helps individual parents get the most out of play opportunities with their children through the 'Playing to Learn, Learning to Play' approach. This is evidenced in the centre's achievement in April 2012 of the Learning Excellence Award for innovative practice.

Good assessment systems are shared between the centre and its childcare and school partners, which enable children, including those with additional needs, to receive consistent support as they move between the three settings. Provision is inclusive and integrated, and the centre provides free accommodation and refreshments to parent-run groups such as the FASD group (for families with children on the autistic spectrum). The centre's work with local fathers has garnered them regional recognition and has greatly enhanced fathers' understanding of child development and thus improved their parenting skills.

Safeguarding arrangements are good, with all staff trained to the appropriate levels to support their roles. Robust systems are in place for ensuring the suitability of staff, volunteers and other adults in proximity to children. There is diligent, timely onward referral of concerns, effective use of the 'team around the child' to marshal support quickly and careful monitoring of the impact of any interventions to ensure that support continues to meet need.

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

### **Recommendations for further improvement**

- Work with health partners to facilitate the receipt of live birth data to enable the centre to offer timely support for breastfeeding and other related issues.
- Work with the local authority to improve the use of data to provide an accurate picture of the needs of the reach area.

- Work with the local authority to use measureable evidence of impact to set precise targets against which the centre and its governance can measure its effectiveness.
- Develop the systems already in place to involve parents in strategic decision-making and governance.

## **How good are outcomes for families?**

**2**

Very positive relationships based on trust and respect, encourage parents to use centre services, often in times of stress. Staff are skilled at developing the users' self-esteem and emotional health, based on giving people genuine achievements to be proud of. These include completing accredited courses which gain them qualifications, and improve key skills such as parenting, or how to play and learn with their children.

The centre tries to compensate for its lack of live birth information by contacting all known pregnant parents. At 10%, obesity in Reception Year is slightly above national levels. The centre has identified the reason for this recent rise, and is promoting healthy eating throughout all of its activities, including 'Bumps, birth and beyond' and 'Young mums-to-be.' Data show increased attendance year on year at sessions promoting physical activity in community venues across the reach area, for example, 'Mini-Movers' and 'Wake up and shake up' and the football sessions. Consultation information shows that parents have high levels of understanding of how to keep their families healthy.

Families unanimously describe the centre as a safe place where they are confident to share any concerns with staff. The majority of parents from target groups show improvement in their parenting skills, including behaviour management. In addition, parents attend first-aid and health and safety courses run by the centre, which increase the safety of families in the home. Good support is provided for families with children who are subject to a child protection plan and the positive impact of this support is monitored well. All staff are trained to use the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) and this is used well to identify need and organise support.

Children enjoy and achieve well in the good-quality on-site childcare, centre crèche and play provision. Some individual parents learn how to make the most of play to foster children's development during outstanding home-based play support sessions based on the 'Playing to Learn, Learning to Play' approach. Last year 82% of children using centre services achieved at least 78 points in the Early Years Foundation Profile scores, which exceeded the national average of 79%, and 56.6% of children, achieved more than six points across the seven scales for personal, social and emotional development, almost in line with national average of 59%. This is a rise of 5.6% from the numbers reaching these levels in 2006-07. The gap between the lowest-achieving 20% of children and their peers is narrowing well. In 2009 -10 the gap was 34.5%, (above the national figure of 32.7%), whereas by 2010-11 this had fallen to 29.2%. Gaps in engagement with target groups are also narrowing.

The strong focus on early years development and good transition arrangements with local schools prepares children well for their future learning. Adults enjoy and achieve well through a variety of courses, some of which lead to accredited qualifications such as literacy and numeracy. There is a clear pathway of progression towards the skills and attitudes that can lead to increased access to employment. Some centre users have secured employment in the wider community as well as in the centre itself and there is some evidence of enterprise, building capacity in the community as well as in individual families. The centre has won a local award for its work in encouraging volunteers.

Children's behaviour is good, and the centre has negotiated 'golden rules' which are used well to establish the expectations for behaviour throughout the setting. All respondents in a recent consultation reported 100% satisfaction with centre services, and told inspectors that the centre staff 'help you find solutions how to cope' and 'make you feel normal'. Too few of the less confident parents, and those from target groups, are involved in decision-making and governance.

These are the grades for the outcomes for families:

<b>The extent to which children, including those from target 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 children and parents, including those from target groups, 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 parents, including those from target groups, 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, including those from target groups, are developing economic stability and independence including access to training and employment.</b>	<b>2</b>

## **How good is the provision?**

<b>2</b>
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Referrals come from a variety of sources including health workers, social care and self-referrals. The centre offers a varied menu of universal, targeted and tailored activities and support, in response to identified needs. Good use is made of information from registrations, questionnaires and discussion. Strong local knowledge is also used well to shape provision, as is regular consultation with the community. However, data about the reach area from the local authority are of variable quality, limiting their usefulness in helping the leadership to plan the programme. The creative use of venues and resources for outreach work across the large reach area is encouraging access for those dependent upon public transport.

Purposeful learning and development underpin much of the centre's work, with most activities specifically directed at improving children's readiness for the next stage in their

learning, and the development and improvement of adults' confidence, skills, knowledge and qualifications. Any absence on courses is diligently followed up; sometimes staff deliver the session missed in the trainee's own home, to enable them to rejoin the course. Achievements are meaningfully celebrated to encourage onward progression.

The centre's welcoming and nurturing ethos stems from the dynamic and caring staff leadership team, and has increased families' access to the centre's services. On-site childcare is of good quality. Parents, including those from more vulnerable groups, say that support is available for as long as needed and many gave compelling evidence of how the care and support has brought them back from the brink of crisis. 'You don't feel like you're accessing a service, you feel like they are your friends' said one parent. The attractive 'information zone' contains well-displayed leaflets and advice on a wide range of topics, including domestic abuse and violence, relationships, sexual health, mental and physical health. Parents can find out about job vacancies on the interactive computer screen. On-site counselling is well-used by parents and is increasing emotional well-being.

These are the grades for the quality of provision:

<b>The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of families, including those in target groups</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups.</b>	<b>2</b>

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

**2**

The leadership and management team has forged an enthusiastic staff team, where roles and responsibilities are shared efficiently and strengthen capacity to continue to improve. Systematic performance management of all staff is closely linked to how well they help the setting meet the priorities in their improvement plans. The local authority provides regular support to the centre, including annual challenge conversations and six-monthly reviews. The meetings have challenged the centre to be able to demonstrate that provision is improving outcomes for a sufficiently high proportion of the local population. The local authority and centre are still developing rigorous systems to be able to provide unequivocal evidence of this.

Accountability arrangements are clear and understood, with delegated powers from the school's governing body to the centre committee. However, the authority does not give the centre consistently accurate information about the reach area, or set precise, challenging targets against which its performance can be measured. This limits the centre's and local authority's ability to know the full extent of how effective they are, and restricts the rigour with which the governing body and centre committee can challenge or hold the leadership to account for their work. Self-evaluation is broadly accurate and becoming more based upon measurable evidence of impact, although the leadership and management's good instincts and strong local knowledge mean that they had already identified the areas for improvement referred to in this report.

The building is appealing and attracts participation. The recent development of the outside area greatly enhances the quality of play and learning and is used well by the crèche and childminder groups. The centre is providing good value for money, and has successfully used its main resource, the staff, in outreach and centre-based work to improve outcomes for many vulnerable individuals in their reach area.

The centre's good arrangements for monitoring access and outcomes promote equality of opportunity well, and show that gaps in outcomes between disadvantaged groups are narrowing. All families, regardless of their particular special need, disability or background, are included fully and priority of provision is now given to increase the life chances of those most at risk of underachieving. The award-winning work with local fathers was creatively extended into the local prison, using a theatre group to help fathers rehearse the parenting and behaviour management skills they were learning.

Safeguarding children and families underpins the centre's good work. Staff are trained well to support their individual roles and responsibilities and have a good understanding of the wider safeguarding agenda, with strong multi-agency working supporting families most at risk, for example, those experiencing domestic violence or abuse. One parent said 'I don't think I'd be here if it wasn't for the centre.' All staff are trained to implement the CAF which is used well to ensure that preventative and intervention strategies are effective. The centre is actively engaged with all families in the area subject to a child protection plan.

Relationships with partners are very positive and the productive joint-working is resulting in the good outcomes experienced by centre users. Information from health partners is insufficient to enable the centre to identify all live births so that swift support can be offered, for example, to encourage breastfeeding from birth.

The opinions and views of centre parents and users are sought in a variety of ways; for example, all written comments are responded to promptly, with respectful dialogue about how the suggested changes may be accomplished. First aid, literacy and numeracy courses and food hygiene courses were provided following consultation. However, the formal engagement of users in the governance and management of the setting is still being developed, and more could be done to include a wider range of parents in decision-making.

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 effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secures improvement in outcomes</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups</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 partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services provided by the centre to meet its core purpose</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which the centre supports and encourages families in the reach area 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 of the on-site childcare provision 'Rising Stars Nursery' from February 2012 was used to help make the judgement about how well children enjoy and achieve.

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## **Summary for centre users**

We inspected Firbank Children's Centre on 23 May 2012. We judged the centre as good overall.

Thank you for giving up your time to talk with inspectors, especially those who came to talk to us at times when you would not normally come to the centre. We also read many of your comments about the centre which are recorded in books and on display. We can see why you enjoy coming to the centre, why you appreciate the caring staff team so much, and we could see the good difference Firbank Children's Centre is making in helping you to live healthier and safer lives.

We were glad to see that your children are making good progress in their development, and getting well prepared for the next stage of their learning. The onsite nursery, the centre and the adjacent school sensibly share the assessment and support systems for children. This eases the children's movement between settings, which is particularly important for children who are receiving additional support. We really enjoyed watching an excellent home-based play session to help individual parents make the most of helping children to learn through play. We think the staff are very effective at getting dads involved in the learning and development of their children, and in the management of their behaviour.

It is also very heart-warming to see how the Chelsea Rawcliffe football tournament is helping dads and men in the area take part together in an enjoyable, healthy exercise activity which is also encouraging them to get involved with the other services the centre can offer.

We have asked the local authority and the centre to work together to get the most accurate information possible about the reach area. This will help the centre to make sure that the services it provides are the ones that will make most difference, especially to those of you who are experiencing particular challenges in your lives. We've also asked the local authority to help the centre set itself precise targets, so that they can measure how well they are doing. This will also help the committee and governing body, as well as the local authority, to be able to challenge the centre leadership and hold it to account for the difference it is making. We also asked the health authority to provide the centre with timely information about the babies born in the area, to enable the centre to contact them quickly and offer support, especially for issues like breastfeeding, where early contact is really important.

We were honoured to hear your individual stories of how the centre has helped you. Some of you give the centre credit for bringing you back from the brink of real crisis. We agree with you, the staff are totally committed to working with their partner agencies such as Women's Aid, to get you the best outcomes they can.

We saw for ourselves how carefully the centre checks to make sure that everyone feels valued and has equal access to, and equal benefit from, the activities and services they offer. The centre is becoming a real hub of the local community.

We could see how much you have to offer the centre, and have asked the leadership to give you more opportunities to help them make the important decisions about how the centre is run, and the services it offers, and to get more of you involved in checking how well the centre is meeting the needs of the local community.

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