

Inspection report for Wycombe (Hampden Way) Children's Centre

Local authority	Buckinghamshire
Inspection number	384232
Inspection dates	24–25 October 2012
Reporting inspector	Christine Field

Centre leader	Elizabeth Martin
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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Linked school if applicable	Not applicable
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Not applicable

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 an additional inspector and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the acting centre coordinator, senior children's centre coordinator, frontline staff, a range of partners, parents' forum, advisory board and local authority representatives, and parents. They also observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation including the self-evaluation form and strategic action plan.

Information about the centre

The centre was designated as a phase 2 centre in August 2007 and has delivered a range of services that meet its full core purpose since September 2009. It is managed by the local authority and is open Monday to Thursday from 9.00am to 5.30pm and Friday from 9.00am to 5.00pm all year round. The centre runs a few services jointly with another children's centre and has recently programmed some new groups to run from local schools in order to extend its outreach work.

There are 976 children under five-years-old living in the reach area, of which 29.7% live in workless households. The reach area comprises two main wards, Totteridge and Bowerdean, which are mixed socially and economically with some pockets of significant deprivation. Families mainly live in social housing with a number of high-rise housing blocks adjacent to the centre. The majority of families living within the reach area are from White British backgrounds with around a fifth from Asian/Asian British or Black backgrounds. Children's skills, knowledge and abilities when the children enter early years provision are typically below the level expected for their age.

The day-to-day management of the centre is the responsibility of the full-time centre coordinator employed by Buckinghamshire County Council. There have been changes to leadership, but the current postholder has been undertaking this responsibility in

an acting capacity since February 2012. The coordinator also manages another centre which was subject to a separate inspection in August 2012. The centre's governance is overseen by an advisory board comprising a range of partners and two parent representatives from the parents' forum.

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

3

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

3

Main findings

The centre's satisfactory effectiveness in meeting the needs of the community results in satisfactory outcomes. Since it opened three years ago it has become a focal point in the community and provides local families with a place in which they feel valued and fully included. The centre is engaging with the majority of families, including the most vulnerable, and is increasingly extending its influence to ensure that all target groups participate in its well-conceived and developing programme of activities. In the last quarter the centre has increased the number of children registered from 49% to 57% and is using the data supplied by the local authority with growing confidence to map provision, identify gaps and plan extended services to better meet the needs of families.

Parents are very positive about the centre's services and their evaluations show clearly that many have improved their lives as a result of the centre's timely interventions. Currently, the proportion of teenage, ethnic minority and families with a child or adult with disabilities participating in sessions is very positive. However, the proportion from lone parent and workless homes is not yet as high. The absence of smart targets in action planning and very thorough monitoring systems that hold the centre to account for its effectiveness are two shortcomings that limit the centre's otherwise good capacity to build for better effectiveness.

The acting coordinator and family support staff show strong commitment to doing their best for families. Their work to help some very vulnerable families to get back on track is a strength in provision. 'I want to give the family support workers a gold star as they have done wonders for my family,' was one comment shared with

inspectors. Safeguarding arrangements meet requirements. Parents feel safe and say that the centre welcomes them, staff are friendly and they feel comfortable during sessions. One or two parents feel that the outdoor space is not as inviting and the parents' forum is working well to improve it, including new landscaping.

The advisory board is developing its role but has yet to inject a sufficient level of challenge to decision making. They currently do not have an independent chair and the link with the very active parents' forum is not strong enough. The centre has already highlighted these aspects as key priorities and has begun to tackle them through a review of the board's role and responsibilities. The local authority has supported the centre during the period of changes in leadership and this has helped the early signs of improvement to be sustained. The acting coordinator, with support from a senior colleague, is ensuring that the centre runs well on a day-to-day basis and that value for money is secure. Nevertheless, too much reliance is placed on the annual conversation with the local authority to hold the centre fully to account and robust quality assurance systems, that add rigour as well as clarity to the governance arrangements, have yet to be established.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Extend the centre's reach so that at least 60% of local families engage in services and the proportion from lone parent and workless families registered with the centre increases significantly.
- Sharpen action planning and future checks by including priority targets that can be measured for impact at key intervals over the life of the plan and re-adjusted in the light of monitoring.
- With the local authority, develop governance and accountability arrangements by:
 - moving swiftly to appoint an independent chair of the advisory board
 - strengthening the links between the advisory board and the parents' forum to enhance parents' involvement in strategic decision making
 - establishing regular and robust quality checks that show how well the centre is performing against its core priorities and key indicators.

How good are outcomes for families?

3

The centre helps families to live healthier lives, although obesity rates remain stubbornly above the local average and improving these are a priority that the centre is working on with key partners. Sessions, such as Mini chefs, involve families preparing and cooking nutritious meals, sharing recipes and learning about portion sizes and the importance of 'five a day'. 'The course has made me more aware of salt and sugar intake hidden in certain foods,' is a typical comment. The breastfeeding is proving popular with new mothers and this is reflected in the 56% sustained breastfeeding rate which is improving.

Family safety is tackled head on by the centre's positive work with partners to ensure that children subject to a child protection plan are well protected. The Common Assessment Framework (CAF) and Team Around the Child (TAC) processes are used appropriately to ensure joined-up multi-agency working that results in bespoke and well-integrated packages of support for families who are particularly vulnerable. First-aid courses raise parents' awareness about home safety, as do the food preparation and food hygiene courses.

Children make good progress from their starting points, although a smaller proportion than seen nationally achieves a good level of development by the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage. The gap between the 20% lowest achieving children and the rest is narrowing but, at 30.6%, it is still wider than seen nationally. The centre has met with early years providers in the reach area to explore how they can tackle this together. Jumpstart, a programme to promote language development through play, is helping to extend children's language skills. For example, children wrote a postcard, walked to the post box, posted it and were thrilled to see it arrive through their letterbox at home.

Adults have a range of opportunities to extend their learning through experiences such as Early Start, with four participants recently taking City and Guilds qualifications and continuing their studies. Parents as First Teacher sessions cover a range of topics including 'life without tantrums' and 'routines – why bother?' which extend parents' confidence to tackle changes in their children's behaviour. Awards ceremonies and certificates for course completion raise the profile of good attendance and parents are rightly proud of their personal achievements which are celebrated in high-quality displays in the centre.

Effective partnerships are developed with those providing advice on housing, debt, and financial management, with case studies providing compelling evidence of how this is proving beneficial to families' economic well-being. Currently, six centre users provide regular volunteer support at the centre. For example, helping prepare the lunch for the very well attended Young Parents weekly group or supporting messy play and craft sessions. There are plans in hand to seek accreditation for the volunteering programme. A past volunteer has gone on to being the local authority nominated Parent Champion.

The parents' forum is a very active group that helps shape services and support centre improvements, for example by running a clothing exchange and bidding for a housing association grant to develop the outdoor play space which is currently rather dull. Two members of the forum are invited to advisory board meetings, but are not always able to attend, and the centre has yet to find a way to make a stronger link between the parents' voice and governance.

These are the grades for the outcomes for families

<p>The extent to which children, including those from target groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles</p>	<p>3</p>
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The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	3
The extent to which all children and parents, including those from target groups, enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	3
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	3
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	3

How good is the provision?

3

The well-organised and appropriately located programme of activities meets the needs of the families who use the centre well, although some newer groups are proving hard to get off the ground, for example, the Jolly Tots session held in partnership with a local school. A majority of local families engage with services including those most in need of support, but fewer lone parents and families from workless homes have the same regular contact as teenage parents, families from minority ethnic groups or those with a child or adult with a disability. The increasing range of performance data supplied by the local authority via the 'score card' is enabling the centre to explore in more depth why this is, and to work to widen access and target its services at better meeting all local needs.

Learning opportunities, such as making story sacks to enliven storytelling, family literacy and numeracy sessions and the commissioned Happy House involving families in enjoying physical activities, together result in families enhancing their personal and social development and basic skills. Those attending a parenting programme said that they now understand the importance of talking to their children and use the activities learned at the centre at home in order to extend their child's experiences. High quality home visits include one-to-one sessions with families that engage them in purposeful play, closer bonding and increasingly less stressful, happier family relationships. Activities tend to be better adapted to adults' needs than children's, with the Young Parents session occasionally missing opportunities to promote parents' positive interactions with their children as they enjoy socialising with one another.

The quality of care for families provided by the centre is satisfactory. Systems for ensuring the health and safety for centre users are thorough, with the exception of the lack of an up-to-date mobile phone policy which the centre knows it still has to establish. The annual survey and post-activity evaluations demonstrate clearly that it is the good quality family support work that makes the most difference to families' lives, especially those suffering personal crises who say they are 'empowered', 'more resilient' and 'better equipped to cope' as a result of the skilful and timely interventions.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	3
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups	3
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups	3

How effective are the leadership and management?

3

The centre has been through uncertain times, with changes of leadership interrupting developments, but has managed to keep forward focused with partners, parents and the advisory group unanimous in their view that a lot of lost ground has been made up since the appointment of the acting coordinator eight months ago. The impact of the satisfactory leadership and management is reflected in the strong partnerships, positive team working, developing programme of activities, influential parents' forum and efficient use of resources. These ensure satisfactory outcomes for the majority of local families who use the centre and who show high levels of satisfaction with services.

Governance arrangements are clear and understood. However, there are not enough robust quality assurance checks in place other than the annual conversation with the local authority to keep a close eye on the centre's development throughout the year. Self-evaluation processes satisfactorily ensure that the coordinator has a clear understanding about strengths and weaknesses. However, the centre's improvement planning lacks precision and there are very few specific targets in place to help the advisory board, which is currently without an independent chair, to gauge the success of the actions being pursued to bring better effectiveness. Staff have high aspirations for the community the centre serves, but the lack of clarity and sharp focus in the systems and tools in place to deliver better outcomes mean that the centre's capacity to sustain improvement is satisfactory rather than good.

Safeguarding arrangements are satisfactory. Criminal record and employment vetting checks meet requirements and staff training is up to date. Cooperation amongst partners ensures that families most at risk, including sufferers of domestic violence, are appropriately protected. Information sharing protocols ensure that the CAF process is used consistently, to aid assessments. The building security and signing procedures are appreciated by parents who feel safe using the centre.

The centre welcomes all families and promotes equality and celebrates diversity so that everyone feels of equal worth. Families identify the centre as a 'lifeline', 'somewhere to go when I am down', and emphasise that it is a place in which they 'feel valued for who they are and not where they come from'. The developing work with local education providers to close the achievement gap is testament to its

commitment to further promoting equality of opportunity.

Partnerships are purposeful and make a positive contribution to the delivery of services that mainly meet local needs, although there is room for improvement in engaging with higher numbers of lone parents and workless families. Parents enjoy attending the centre and benefit from well-planned activities that respond well to their needs. The activities programme is reviewed regularly in response to staff evaluations and parent suggestions, with changes made as appropriate, for example to the content of sessions. The centre is an attractive place with good quality resources that families enjoy using. Given the current level of engagement and overall satisfactory outcomes, value for money is satisfactory.

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	3
The effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secure improvement in outcomes	3
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	3
The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties	3
The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults	3
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	3
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	3

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

Not applicable.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected Wycombe (Hampden Way) Children's Centre on 24 and 25 October 2012. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

We talked with some of you, your children, staff, and a wide range of partners, parents' forum, advisory board and local authority representatives linked to the centre. We looked at evaluations of the centre's work and a range of documents and very much enjoyed chatting to you during activities. It was great to see so many young parents enjoying being together with their children and tucking into the shared lunch so carefully prepared by parents and volunteers. So many of you were keen to tell us what the centre means to you and comments such as 'it's a lifeline' and 'I don't know where I would be without the staff's support' were typical. Thank you very much for your contribution to the inspection.

Since your centre opened three years ago it has become a focal point for the community and provides you with a place in which you told us you feel valued and fully included. It is good to see that an increasing number of local families are taking full advantage of what is on offer, but there is still room for improvement and we have asked the centre to press ahead with getting more families involved. If you know anyone who would benefit from attending the centre, please let them know.

The acting coordinator and family support staff are working hard to move the centre forward. The advisory board is developing its role, but has yet to fulfil all of its responsibilities and this is an area for improvement. Additionally, its link with the parents' forum is not yet strong enough and it would be good to see the regular contribution of parents at this level of decision making. We have asked the centre to look at how this could be achieved and to make sure that the advisory board and local authority keep a much closer check on how well the centre is performing over time.

The work of centre staff in helping some of you in times of crisis is a particular strength. As someone told us, 'I want to give the family support workers a gold star as they have done wonders for my family.' You told us that you feel safe at the centre and that everyone is given a warm and friendly welcome. One or two parents feel that the outdoor space is not as inviting and it is good to know that the parents' forum is working actively to make it look better.

We thoroughly enjoyed our time at the centre and would like to send you our very best wishes for the future.

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