

Inspection report for Daisychain Children's Centre

Local authority	Milton Keynes
Inspection number	367787
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Reporting inspector	Christine Field

Centre leader	Vacant
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Centre address	Melrose Avenue, Bletchley, Milton Keynes, MK3 6PS
Telephone number	01908 641454
Email address	Daisychain.ChildrensCentre@milton-keynes.gov.uk

Linked school if applicable	Abbey Primary School: URN 110401
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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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.ofsted.gov.uk

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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 a range of partners, advisory board members, local authority representatives, frontline staff and parents. They also observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation including the self-evaluation form, annual conversation report and service delivery plan.

Information about the centre

The centre was designated in 2009 as a phase three centre based at Abbey Primary School in West Bletchley and has delivered a range of services to meet its core purpose since September 2010. The centre serves six distinct communities, two of which, Far Bletchley and West Bletchley, are amongst the 30% most deprived in the country. The centre is open Monday to Thursday from 8am to 5pm and Friday 8am to 4.30pm all year round. Additionally, the centre delivers outreach services in three different locations and runs a family session on one Saturday each month.

There are 1,264 children under four years old living in the reach area, of which 27.5% live in workless households. Some 25% of families take up the childcare element of Working Tax Credit. The majority of families living within the reach area are from White British backgrounds, with 25% being from a wide range of different minority ethnic groups. Children's skills, knowledge and abilities when they enter early years provision are typically below the levels expected for their age.

The day-to-day management of the centre is the responsibility of a full-time centre coordinator. There have been three coordinators in the last two years and periods where the centre was without a coordinator. This post is currently under recruitment. In the interim, the senior family support worker is overseeing the day-to-day management of the centre with some assistance from neighbouring children's centre coordinators, particularly concerning budgetary matters. The centre's governance is

provided by an advisory board. A new chairperson has very recently been elected but has yet to chair a meeting.

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

4

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

4

Main findings

The centre’s effectiveness in meeting the needs of its community is inadequate. This is due to weaknesses in leadership and management. There has been insufficient direction to the centre’s work over a period of time and its performance has not been monitored rigorously. Improvement planning and the actions taken to increase the centre’s reach into its community have had limited impact.

The centre increased its reach by 9% last year but is unlikely to meet its target of 21% increase by March 2013. Just under 30% of families in the area are currently registered with the centre. Well-conceived plans have recently been established to increase families’ engagement but these are not being pursued with sufficient vigour.

Families who use the centre include all target groups and they hold positive views about the quality of services and the impact they have on improving their lives. Comments such as, ‘We have had some great tips to help at bedtime which have improved my child’s sleeping patterns,’ are typical. Family support and highly effective multi-agency work, including a thorough use of the Common Assessment Framework process, are enabling some of the most vulnerable families to be well safeguarded and as a consequence, lead healthier and safer lives.

The strong partnerships with early years providers, together with appropriately planned centre-led activities, such as ‘Stay and Play’, are helping to prepare children for school. Key performance data for the area are positive, with the gap between the lowest achieving 20% of children and the rest, reducing more rapidly than is seen nationally. Adults are involved with courses that improve their personal, social and parenting skills but too few, especially those from workless homes, are accessing further learning opportunities that specifically enhance their economic well-being.

Families using the centre make a satisfactory contribution to its life and development, for example, through the 'Chums' parents' forum or via post-activity evaluations. Parents are invited to the advisory board meetings but there are no formal links between the forum and board; as such, parents' role in governance is limited. The centre is actively working to revitalise the forum and ensure its composition reflects the local community.

Self-evaluation provides an unrealistic picture of the centre's strengths and weaknesses. Governance arrangements lack clarity and some members of the advisory board are unsure about the role and remit of the group. Quality assurance arrangements, including those established by the local authority, have not been sufficiently demanding in holding the centre to account. Staff are aware of the need to raise the centre's profile in the wider community but identify that the lack of direction restricts their effectiveness in helping the centre to move forward. The centre is currently without a coordinator and, given the other weaknesses identified by this inspection, the centre's capacity for sustaining improvement is inadequate.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- With the local authority, improve leadership and management to ensure that services fully meet local needs and result in improving the outcomes for children and families by:
 - moving swiftly to appoint a new coordinator
 - implementing a robust system of self-evaluation which includes a sensible number of priorities, measurable targets, systematic monitoring and measuring the effectiveness of activities and services
 - clarifying governance arrangements and ensuring that the advisory board meets its terms of reference, involves parents in its work and rapidly develops its role in holding the centre to account
 - ensuring that all stakeholders are clear about the centre's priorities and have appropriate opportunities to help realise them.
- Extend the centre's reach and increase the engagement of all target groups, especially lone parents and workless families, so that the centre's target is met by March 2013.
- Involve more adults, particularly those from workless homes, in activities that enhance their economic well-being, and establish robust tracking systems so that the centre can see clearly what impact its services have.

How good are outcomes for families?

4

The summary judgement on overall outcomes is inadequate because of the limited impact the centre is having in supporting the high proportion of workless families with young children in order to increase their economic well-being. The centre

signals a few centre users to various agencies who offer training and employment-related services but is not keeping a close enough check on how many access services, how they get on or what further support they require from the centre to help them get back into work.

A range of activities help families who use the centre to exercise regularly and eat more healthily. Activities such as cookery classes are supporting the reducing obesity rates in the area. The centre gives a high profile to breastfeeding and rates are increasing as a result of the supportive peer mentoring and encouragement given to mothers with new babies. Partnerships with a range of agencies such as health visitors, dieticians and oral health specialists and regular presentations, for example on weaning, are proving beneficial to the lives of some centre users. Although a majority of families in the area are engaging with health services, the centre is not rigorously registering all families who attend these services and this is a missed opportunity to further extend its work.

Children, including those subject to a child protection plan, are well protected due to the centre's robust use of the Common Assessment Framework, timely interventions and effective partnerships with health, social care and other early education providers. The minority of local families who use the centre say they feel safe and their awareness about safety matters is soundly raised through talks from experts in the field, such as fire and police officers. Parenting skills and positive behaviour management techniques are improving as a result of some parents' sustained participation in programmes like 'Incredible Years'. Families with a child or adult with disabilities, who are in touch with the centre through activities such as 'Sunflowers', say that any concerns they have are listened to and acted upon.

Children in the reach area make at least satisfactory progress in developing the skills they need for the future. At 64.5%, the proportion achieving a good level of development is above both local and national averages. Centre activities are suitably planned to develop children's interests. For example, during a session to promote language, mothers and their children designed and made story-sacks with various resources such as stick puppets, to help bring their storytelling alive. Occasionally opportunities are missed to fully promote children's 'purposeful talk' through prompts and questioning.

Relationships amongst centre users are harmonious with children and parents from different ethnic backgrounds enjoying having fun together. The volunteer programme assists adults in building new skills and a very small number have subsequently moved into work. Currently two volunteers are in training. The centre does not have sufficient data to show the extent that adults benefit from any courses they access to improve their skills or how much progress they make relative to their starting points.

Parents contribute to decision making by sharing their views after all sessions and say their ideas are taken on board, for example, in programming new activities. Through 'Chums', a handful extend their personal development by running their own

bank account and organising trips, such as to Whipsnade Zoo. Two members of 'Chums' are invited to attend advisory board meetings, but minutes show their attendance is irregular and the forum's constitution makes no specific reference to their role in governance.

These are the grades for the outcomes for families

The extent to which children, including those from target groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles	3
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	4

How good is the provision?

3

Despite shortcomings in the extent to which services meet the needs of the majority of local families, provision is judged as satisfactory overall because of the good level of care that results in some of the most vulnerable families being very well supported and leading improved lives. Additionally, centre-led learning and development opportunities are supporting children's progress and are contributing to children's positive start to education. The centre works in productive partnership with early years providers to promote language development and help children to be well prepared for school. Plans are in hand to further develop assessment strategies and introduce 'Learning Journals' so that parents can play a fuller role in supporting their child's learning. A number of new activities have been programmed, for example a family workshop and music session, to further extend services, but these have yet to have a demonstrable impact on improving the outcomes for families.

Assessment is used satisfactorily to ensure that families who engage with the centre benefit from its services. However, only a minority of local families participate in services and the centre has yet to get to grips fully with why this is. There have been problems with the input of new family data into the system that captures registrations and the centre has been without administrative support for extended periods. The well-conceived plan in place to increase families' engagement is not driving the necessary improvement quickly enough.

Timely referrals from partners such as health services enable the centre to respond

quickly to specific needs, for example, in the good support given to families with a child with physical disabilities and to new parents through the 'Primrose Group' sessions. Families from minority ethnic groups are engaging soundly with services but lone parents and families from workless homes, of which there are a significant proportion in the community, are in contact in only relatively low numbers. Saturday sessions are resulting in an increasing number of dads engaging with services. Activities are generally appropriately located, although the centre has highlighted that Far Bletchley has only a limited number of activities for children aged under two years.

The quality of care provided is good and results in some of the most vulnerable local families benefitting from bespoke services that develop their improved well-being. A high number of domestic abuse sufferers are helped to build self-confidence as a result of the centre's effective family support work and are empowered to take control of their lives. One of the views expressed following involvement in the 'Freedom programme' was, 'The centre is helping me to move on after visiting some very dark places and knowing I am not alone.' Families with mental health or drug dependency issues are effectively assisted through times of personal crisis by the staff's sensitive interventions alongside other specialist support. Case studies provide compelling evidence of the good impact that family support work has on keeping those most at risk free from harm.

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	4
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	2

How effective are the leadership and management?

4

Inadequate leadership and management in important areas limit the centre's capacity to build for better effectiveness and result in it providing inadequate value for money. Nevertheless, day-to-day management of the centre is effective and, despite the vacancy in the coordinator post, staff are positive and, working as a tight-knit team, do their best for the community they serve. Staff are aware of some of the issues facing the centre but have had a limited involvement in self-evaluation processes or improvement planning and feel that the lack of strategic direction is impeding their effectiveness. They have limited capacity to take on new work, such as marketing the centre in the wider community and increasing user engagement, as they have a full caseload of family support work, much of which is of a highly complex nature. They have built a strong network with health visitor colleagues which involves six-weekly meetings to share information about the most vulnerable

families and offer support to one another. The professional supervision of staff, however, has been 'light touch' for some time and has not informed their professional development or good time management as effectively as it should. These are issues for the new coordinator to address.

Governance arrangements are unclear. The local authority's quality assurance systems have not been effective in pinpointing the weaknesses that have recently become apparent. The advisory body's role in looking critically at the centre's performance is unsatisfactory. Not all board members have seen the terms of reference and some have an incomplete understanding of its role and remit. Although flagged as a priority, their promised review has not yet happened. Some members have not seen the self-evaluation form let alone been involved in the process of self-audit. There is limited ownership of the service delivery plan and few have accessed the local authority's annual conversation report. Such omissions limit the board's effectiveness in injecting both support and challenge. A new chair person has yet to oversee her first meeting but has a realistic view about the changes required in order that governance improves.

Equalities and inclusion are promoted soundly; for example, the centre helps some families to secure funded education places for two-year-olds. The centre's involvement with minority ethnic families is helping to reduce feelings of isolation and enable their inclusion in a range of activities. The effective partnerships with other early years providers are enabling children who are in danger of falling behind to benefit from positive learning experiences.

Safeguarding arrangements are given the highest priority and meet requirements. All staff have undergone the necessary vetting checks and are up to date with training. Effective one-to-one outreach support is provided for families most in need, and their work with children subject to a child protection plan makes a tangible difference to improving their lives. Family support work and skilfully conducted home visits are particularly positive features of the centre's work to improve health and safety outcomes which families and colleague professionals rate highly.

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	4
The effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secure improvement in outcomes	4
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	4
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	2
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	4

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

None.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected Daisychain Children’s Centre on 9 and 10 October 2012. We judged the centre as inadequate overall because of weaknesses in leadership and management that have got in the way of the centre reaching as many local families as it should. Only a third of families are in regular contact and staff know that more families would benefit from their support. We have asked that over half of local families get involved with the centre by March 2013. If you know of anyone who would benefit from the centre’s services, please ask them to get in touch with the centre.

We talked with some of you, your children, staff, and a wide range of partners, advisory board members and local authority officers 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 children having so much fun at the ‘Stay and Play’ session, enjoying the physical activities during ‘Sunflower’ group and listening so carefully to the story about ‘The Very Hungry Caterpillar’ before making their own story sacks. We know that many of you see the centre as a ‘lifeline’ because you told us how important it is to your daily lives and how friendly and welcoming the staff are, and that home visits result in you receiving good support. Typical comments include, ‘We have had some great tips to help at bedtime which have improved my child’s sleeping patterns.’

The centre’s strong partnership with early years providers helps your children to learn successfully and be well prepared for school. Some of you are involved with courses that improve your personal, social and parenting skills but not many, especially those of you from workless homes, are accessing further learning

opportunities that improve your employment prospects, and we have asked the centre to look at this.

Some of you provide good suggestions that help the centre plan activities and a handful of you are involved in 'Chums', the parents' forum that organises trips and fundraising events. Members of the 'Chums' group are invited to the advisory board meetings but we can see that they only attend from time to time and we can't see how this helps centre users to have their say in the board's work. If you would like to get involved with 'Chums' or the work of the advisory board please let the staff know.

As you are no doubt aware, the centre is currently without a coordinator and this is holding things up. We have asked the centre to work with the local authority and press ahead with establishing firm leadership and to put in place the systems required for ensuring the centre sets clear priorities for improvement, monitors actions closely and meets its challenging targets.

Thank you for all the help you gave us, and best wishes for the future.

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