

Inspection report for Woodlands Children's Centre

Local authority	Milton Keynes
Inspection number	406987
Inspection dates	25–26 October 2012
Reporting inspector	Penny Fisher HMI

Centre coordinator	Linzi Collings
Date of previous inspection	No previous inspection
Centre address	c/o Hanslope School Long Street Road Hanslope Buckinghamshire MK19 7BL
Telephone number	01234 241837
Email address	Woodlands.ChildrensCentre@milton-keynes.gov.uk

Linked school if applicable	Hanslope Primary School 110230
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.

Report published: November 2012



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

Inspectors held meetings with the centre coordinators and staff. They met with representatives from the local authority, partners, advisory board and parents. They observed the centre's work and looked at a range of documentation.

Information about the centre

Woodlands Children's Centre was designated as a phase two children's centre in December 2007 and has delivered a range of services to meet its core purpose since March 2010. The centre is managed by the local authority and offers services across the rural communities of North Milton Keynes and Olney. Services include family play sessions and family support services. There is no full day-care provision. Activities take place in shared spaces on the site of Hanslope Primary School, at the Olney Youth Centre and other venues. The office for the children's centre is in Olney. The centre has been run by a part-time centre coordinator since September 2011. A further part-time coordinator has just been appointed on a job-sharing basis.

The population is very largely White British, with the number of children from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds being significantly lower than found in Milton Keynes as a whole. Approximately 11% of children live in lone parent families compared to 22% across the local authority area. A low number of children are living in poverty compared to the average for Milton Keynes as a whole. Fewer families are eligible for free school meals than is average for both Milton Keynes and England. Ward data show that unemployment, long-term unemployment and youth unemployment figures are lower than Milton Keynes and England averages. Approximately 12% of children are in households where no adults work, compared to the Milton Keynes average of 26%. The take-up of formal childcare by low income working families is slightly below the local average.

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 overall effectiveness of Woodlands Children's Centre is inadequate. The centre engages too few families in the reach area, including those from vulnerable groups. The centre is not yet fully established within the community and is only engaging with a minority of families with young children in the area. Underdeveloped partnerships result in a low number of referrals to the centre from other agencies. Despite some positive work with the small number of families receiving family support, the centre is not fully effective in identifying and meeting the needs of the families from target groups, such as families from workless homes and those suffering from postnatal depression or feeling socially isolated.

Health outcomes in the reach area are satisfactory. Children are adequately protected and sound procedures ensure families feel safe and are kept safe when attending activities. However, there is insufficient evidence to demonstrate how well the centre is improving children's achievement or families' economic well-being. Too few parents contribute to the decision making and governance of the centre.

The local authority supplies a range of data to the centre, but this is not always timely and does not enable the centre to reach those most in need. The local authority acknowledges that its data provision is not yet sufficiently robust.

Governance and accountability arrangements are inadequate. The centre coordinator has been without managerial support for several months and staff have not received adequate professional supervision or performance management. The local authority recognises that there has been a lack of monitoring to support the centre's development. Staff shortages at the centre are now being addressed and there is a clear commitment from the joint coordinators to improve effectiveness. The advisory board is established, but the number of partners and parents attending regularly is low. Although highly supportive of the centre's work, their role in challenging the

centre or holding it to account is underdeveloped.

The centre has not established systematic evaluation of its services, including those commissioned from key partners. Therefore, services are not sufficiently planned to meet local needs. The centre's self-evaluation is out of date and overly optimistic. It does not accurately reflect the centre's balance of strengths and weaknesses and, as such, does not reliably inform service delivery planning. This omission limits the centre's ability to improve outcomes and demonstrate impact. The delivery plan 2012/2013 has some sensible priorities included but is not fully implemented. The centre's capacity to improve is inadequate.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Ensure the centre reaches more families, especially target families and those families identified as in most need of intervention and support.
- Ensure the centre has rigorous systems for evaluation, including accurate self-evaluation, which are reviewed regularly.
- Develop effective ways to measure the impact the centre is having on the outcomes for children and families.
- Ensure more parents are able to regularly express their views and have a say in the development of the centre's services and governance.
- Ensure the advisory board provides the necessary challenge to the centre to drive improvement.
- Further develop partnerships with the community and other agencies, especially schools and health professionals, in order to establish the centre's position at the heart of the reach area.

How good are outcomes for families?

4

Despite satisfactory outcomes for children's health and safety, overall outcomes are inadequate because too few families are engaged with the centre and there is limited impact from its provision on helping improve their lives.

Children's achievement by the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage fell in 2011 in the reach area, but remains slightly above the Milton Keynes and national average. The gap between the 20% lowest achievers and their peers is narrower than the local average, although it widened in 2011. Children enjoyed the messy play session and 'Bumps and Babies', and planning is becoming more effective following support from the children's centre teacher. However, there is more to do to develop the skills of staff so that they confidently deliver purposeful play. Children's starting points are not known and the centre cannot demonstrate children's educational achievements. Offers to support schools in preparing children for transition have so far been

unsuccessful. The centre cannot show the impact of its work on parents' personal development and learning. Although parents are signposted to local courses, their subsequent attendance and achievement are not followed up. There is also no compelling evidence to demonstrate the centre's effectiveness in targeting the small but significant proportion of families who need better economic stability. The take-up of formal childcare by low-income working families is lower than average for Milton Keynes and has decreased. The centre is struggling to engage volunteers, with no parents currently involved in voluntary work.

There are low rates of emergency admissions to hospital in the reach area. Parents are encouraged to consider children's safety, for example, through free home fire checks and some have attended a first aid course. Parents spoken to during the inspection say they feel safe. Risk assessments are carried out at all of the various venues used across the area. A small number of families are supported through the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) and family support workers engage in the team around the family approach, with some positive outcomes. However, as with other services, family support work is not yet routinely evaluated in order to demonstrate how well the centre is making a difference to family life. A low number of referrals into the centre mean that only seven families are currently receiving targeted support.

In Hanslope and Castlethorpe, parents can access monthly baby clinics, oral health seminars and weaning support as part of the 'Bumps and Babies' session. The work of the centre 'has helped me to understand how my child develops', said one parent. Comparatively low levels of obesity are supported by activities such as 'Mini Strikers' sessions and children enjoy healthy snacks. Breastfeeding support services are not yet developed and the centre has identified the need to improve breastfeeding rates in the Olney area as a priority within the delivery plan.

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	4
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	4
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?

4

The extent to which services meet the needs of users is inadequate. The centre delivers services across the large rural reach area. However, low staffing levels and the lack of a permanent play space have had a negative impact on the range and quality of services provided. For example, staff time is taken up with snack preparation and packing away resources, which means that the time spent with children and parents is reduced. Areas in which to display information regarding other services and sources of help are limited.

The number of families registered at the centre has increased, but remains low at 39%. A very small number of unemployed parents are engaging with the centre. This is also the case for parents from some Black and minority backgrounds, lone parents and those with disabilities. There are low numbers of referrals from schools, pre-schools and health visitors. Although the quality of the sessions observed was satisfactory, some sessions are underused, for example 'Let's Talk and Play' sessions, where parents can access a speech and language therapist to help develop their children's communication skills. Activities held during the summer varied widely in their success, attracting between two and 116 centre users. Activities are universal, which is appropriate to meeting some of the needs of the reach area, but simply not enough families are aware of what is available or use the services.

There is some effective family support work and inspectors saw examples where the centre has responded well to families in crisis. Due to the rural nature of the area the centre provides transport for those parents having difficulty accessing the services.. Information, advice and guidance from family support workers are available, but the lack of consistent staffing means that effective relationships with parents have been hard to establish.

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	4
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups	3

How effective are the leadership and management?

4

Arrangements for governance and accountability are inadequate. A recruitment freeze has seen the centre without a full complement of staff over the last year. Although this is now being addressed, the lack of performance management and

managerial support from the local authority over this period has had a negative impact on the overall effectiveness of the centre. The centre's self-evaluation is overly positive and does not give a clear picture of its strengths and areas for development.

Safeguarding procedures are adequate. The safeguarding audit is reviewed and arrangements reported on annually. Comprehensive policies are in line with the local Safeguarding Children Board guidelines. Systems relating to Criminal Records Bureau checks, including commissioned services and staff employed through agencies, meet requirements. Staff are clear about when to refer to children's social care. The local authority has just introduced new Children and Family Practice teams in order to deliver early help across three locality teams. Staff in the North locality, where the centre is based, have still to attend training on the new Children and Family single assessment, which has recently replaced the CAF.

Local authority data are currently not in a format that enables the centre to be sufficiently focused on identifying and meeting the needs of those families from targeted groups. The number of targeted families engaging with the centre, including disabled parents and parents of children with a disability, is too low. A lack of evaluation leaves the centre unable to demonstrate how it is improving outcomes in some areas, including how its work is having an impact on narrowing the gap between the lowest achievers and their peers in the area. The centre is currently providing inadequate value for money as the management of resources is not ensuring that services and provision are improving outcomes.

Underdeveloped partnerships mean that provision is not always cohesive. Relationships with schools are variable, with no tracking of children's progress taking place, although work is just beginning with a local pre-school and primary school. The centre has limited involvement with some agencies including local voluntary organisations. Three Primary Care Trusts cover the centre's reach area and ways of working with health visitors are variable. Health data are not available for the reach area as a whole. The local authority recognises the need to work more closely in partnership with health services to ensure a consistent approach that is not dependent on individual relationships. There is no liaison with midwifery services or Police Community Support Officers. The lack of cohesion is having an impact on effectiveness because the centre is highly dependent on referrals in order to identify and reach vulnerable families, and these are not currently forthcoming.

Although parents who spoke to inspectors were positive in their support for the centre, their views are not sufficiently influencing the design and delivery of services. Parents' views are gathered informally within 'stay and play' sessions, but are not always recorded. The advisory board is chaired by an enthusiastic and committed parent, but the centre identifies rightly the need to increase partner and parent membership and attendance at meetings.

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	4
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	4
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 Woodlands Children's Centre on 25 and 26 October 2012. We judged the centre as inadequate overall.

Thank you to the few parents that came to talk to us in meetings and during activities. We found hearing your views and your contributions very useful. We know that many of you appreciate the centre's work. The children were enjoying the play sessions that we saw and you said you feel safe and respected. The coordinators ensure that all staff who work with you and your children are suitable to do so.

The family support workers carry out some work that makes a real difference to a few of you and your families. However, not enough local families attend the play sessions and activities. We are worried that those families that could really benefit from the support the centre can provide are not aware of what it does or how it can help them. The centre has yet to develop strong enough relationships with other professionals in the area, such as schools and health visitors, because at the moment they are not always working together effectively. Other professionals are not referring many families to the centre so they can get the help they need.

As parents, you are not enabled to really share your views with the centre so that they can use what you say to make sure that they are putting on the right services that meet your needs. This means that, although some sessions are well attended, such as messy play, others are poorly attended. This includes some of the summer activities that were provided earlier this year. The centre is not reviewing how well the services are working so it does not know if it is making a difference for you and the families in the area. There is insufficiently effective use of data to inform decision making and this means that the coordinators do not know if the centre's work is having a positive influence on helping you and your children to enjoy and achieve well and be economically stable.

There are not enough parents involved in the running of the centre. The chair of the advisory board is a parent and doing a worthwhile job, but the centre needs more of you to get involved, as volunteers or as a parent representative on the advisory board.

Thank you to those of you that we met, and we wish you all the best for the future and for the future of your centre.

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