

Inspection report for Highwoods Children's Centre

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Reporting inspector	Qaisra Shahraz

Centre leader	Audrey Haggis
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Centre address	The Ark Highwoods Methodist Church Colchester CO4 9FF
Telephone number	01206 845557
Fax number	01206 845557
Email address	audrey.haggis@barnardos.org.uk

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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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 representatives of the local authority, centre staff, advisory board members, health professionals, voluntary and statutory partner organisations, a head teacher and parents.

They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

Highwoods Children's Centre serves the ward of Highwoods which borders the wards of Myland and St. John's in the county of Essex. It was designated in 2008 as a phase two centre, and is located in a Methodist Church, sharing the site with the local health team. It fulfils its core purpose by providing childcare and health services, referring families to employability programmes and the local childminder network, and through its outreach support for families. The centre serves a diverse community living in one of the 25% most deprived areas in the country.

There are 815 children under the age of five years living in the centre's reach area. The large majority of families (87.5%) resident in the centre's reach area are from White British backgrounds with the remainder from other minority ethnic backgrounds including African, Asian and Eastern European. Families from Travelling backgrounds have recently moved into the area. Unemployment is relatively low in the area. For example, 19.6% of young children live in households that are dependent on work-related benefits. Children's skills, knowledge and abilities when they enter early years provision are typically below those expected for their age.

The centre is managed by Essex Local authority and Barnardo's, the Lead Body for this and 18 other children's centres in Tendring and Colchester. The centre management are awaiting revised arrangements under the new Children's Centre Strategic Board for North-east Essex. The centre is governed by an advisory board

which comprises representatives from different partner agencies. A centre service manager is responsible for the day-to-day running of the centre and is supported by a team of family support workers.

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

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

2

Main findings

Highwoods Children Centre’s overall effectiveness is good. With its overall good and improving outcomes for families, good quality provision and good leadership and management it demonstrates its success in meeting local needs really well. It provides a warm and friendly environment in which adults and children experience a high-level of enjoyment in taking part in activities that enhance their knowledge and also increase their self-esteem and personal confidence. Children make good progress in all aspects of their development. Though they make a satisfactory contribution to the life of the centre, parents’ involvement in governance matters, and their involvement in the advisory board specifically, is limited. The centre’s excellent work to keep users safe results in their outstanding well-being.

The centre is highly responsive and provides learning sessions and services tailored to meeting the needs of different target groups and the most disadvantaged families within its reach area. Registrations are increasing but management recognise the need to target the increased participation of specific groups from the reach area including families from Travelling backgrounds. The level and quality of support, advice and guidance provided by the centre staff and their partners is good, both transforming and making a positive difference to the lives of many users, including lone parents and those undergoing a personal crisis.

Despite the recent changes, the governance, accountability arrangements and management of the centre are good. A highly skilled and ambitious manager, centre staff team of workers are proactive and work hard to support vulnerable families both in the centre and out in the community. Self-evaluation is robust, with managers having a clear overview of the centre’s strengths and areas for improvement.

Overall, data are used well to shape services and for target setting and for monitoring of services. However, the formal system for monitoring and tracking of adults' achievement and progress is currently under-developed. The centre staff accurately identifies, and works effectively, to remove barriers that might prevent vulnerable families accessing services. The centre's celebration of diversity through its annual 'Multicultural day' event is good. Outstanding partnerships have enabled the centre to provide successful joint services to support and benefit the large majority of families in its reach area. The improving outcomes, accuracy of self-evaluation, effective and efficient use of resources, and increasing engagement with users demonstrate the centre's good capacity for sustained improvement.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Extend the participation rates of families living in the reach area from different groups, including the Travellers' families so that they can benefit from the centre's good quality provision.
- Increase the involvement of users in making a positive contribution to the governance of the centre and specifically the work of the advisory board.
- Improve the tracking of adult users' achievements and progress into employment and further education and better celebrate their learning journeys.

How good are outcomes for families?

2

Overall, health outcomes are improving, including the proportion of mothers initiating and sustaining breastfeeding at six to eight weeks which is currently at 75%. The centre is effectively tackling obesity and promoting physical exercise through its centre-based 'Fun and Fitness' sessions, walks in the country park and 'Fun in the Forest' activities. Promoting healthy eating lifestyles underpins much of the centre's work, for example, through its cookery demonstrations at the 'Food and Health Matters Group', the distribution of recipe cards, growing of vegetables and offer of healthy snacks during sessions. Users benefit from having access to a good range of health services, including to the health visitors based at the Bluebell health centre from whom parents learn tips about weaning.

Protecting families is a very high priority for the centre. Parents state they feel very safe in the centre. Many parents have benefited from the knowledge gained on the 'Paediatric First Aid course' about how to keep themselves and their children safe. Family Support staff work extremely well with the intervention team and make very effective use of the Common Assessment Framework to devise coordinated strategies that result in highly integrated actions and individual plans to support

families. This ensures that families and children involved with statutory child protection agencies, including those subject to a child protection plan, are fully protected against harm.

There is strong focus on the social and emotional well-being of families and on developing positive relationships between parents and their children. This includes fathers benefiting from opportunities to bond and play with their children in 'Baby Massage for Dads' and 'Family Fun Day' sessions. One staff member informed inspectors about the quality and importance of this sort of emotional bonding, 'The best thing is seeing the attachment between the parent and the child. It's a very lovely thing'.

Children make good progress from their starting points. The scores in language, literacy and in socialisation at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage are improving. Children enjoy reading and sharing books with adults. At 23% the achievement gap between the lowest achieving 20% of children and the rest is much narrower than seen nationally. Local schools' head teachers report improved attitudes from children who have attended activities within the centre. Adult users' confidence in their parenting skills are enhanced through the centre's delivery of recognised and accredited programmes for parenting, play and development.

There is effective monitoring and tracking of the centre's provision and 'distance travelled' of children's achievements through the use of photographic learning journeys and the use of 'Soft Outcomes Universal Learning' (SOUL) questionnaires for adult users who access services. However, managers recognise that the formal tracking of adult users' progress and achievement into employment and further education is an area for the centre still to address.

The economic and social well-being of many families is much improved because of their engagement with the centre's services. Users benefit from the effective signposting to relevant services, relating to employment and further education at other venues including the local College. The 'Work Club' sessions led by Jobcentre Plus staff provide good opportunities for adult users to prepare themselves for the world of work and to find jobs. Parents are encouraged to become volunteers and some deliver services. However, the suspension of the parents' forum in the last few months has resulted in missed opportunities for parents to make a full contribution to the life of the centre and governance matters.

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	2
The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	1
The extent to which all children and parents, including those from target groups, enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal	2

and social development	
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	2

How good is the provision?

2

Highwoods Children Centre's provision and services have continued to develop despite the recent changes and the takeover by a new lead body. Some 72% of local families are registered with the centre. Participation rates for families have increased over the last year and the centre is successful in reaching all of the target groups. However, managers aim to target more vulnerable families, who are currently not as well engaged with the centre's services, including families from Travelling backgrounds newly settled in the Highwoods area. Users' needs are thoroughly and sensitively assessed including through the use of the Common Assessment Framework. This enables families to access appropriate and tailor-made services and support to match their needs. The engagement of isolated families, supported by the centre's outreach services is good. To make its activities accessible to some families who live in very rural areas, the centre provides a free taxi service.

Users benefit from the wide range of well planned and purposeful learning opportunities aimed at improving their lives. Users speak highly of the new knowledge and skills they and their children have gained from these enjoyable activities. 'I learnt a lot and found the sessions very educational and with someone guiding you about parenting matters,' are the words of one happy parent. There are many opportunities for parents and children to play, learn, and develop new skills together, as well as benefiting from tips from the health workers about baby development. This is helping to increase the proportion of children achieving 78+ scale points in the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile. One parent talked about the pleasure she gained in doing things with her child, 'The 'All About 1's' and 'Health and Food Matters' courses made me and my child bond together and enjoy each other's company. We cooked together and tried different textures of food and discussed dairy allergies.' A free crèche is provided for some parenting programmes which widens access.

Good support and guidance provided by the centre help to promote economic stability, for example, in securing the benefits to which families are eligible. Users' views and case studies highlight the tremendous difference made to their lives and the good level of support they receive. One grateful parent explained to the inspectors how she benefited from the personalised support and guidance she received. 'The staff made me a personal and financial plan. This helped me with accessing the relevant benefits and support.' Similarly women who have undergone personal difficulties such as domestic abuse are well-supported in having an

opportunity to share and learn from the experiences of other women in support groups such as 'Risky Relationships'.

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	2
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups	2
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups	2

How effective are the leadership and management?

2

Leadership, management and governance are good. The local authority provides a clear strategic lead for the centre. Morale remains high despite recent organisational changes. Highly ambitious and with a strong commitment to improvement the centre staff and managers work well together, have a shared vision and bring with them wide-ranging skills and experiences which help to shape and improve the services provided. Self-evaluation, on-going reviews and improvement planning are rigorous processes and enable leaders to have an accurate picture of the centre's strengths and weaknesses. Data are used well to identify gaps in provision and to focus on areas of engagement and performance against national and local targets. The centre is aware of the need to extend user's involvement in the work of the advisory board.

Performance management through annual conversations and staff supervision systems is robust, with a strong focus on developing the skills of all staff. This has included the sharing of good practice and evaluation of services through the centre's innovative practice of swapping staff for a week with another centre. Users' engagement and the use of their views are robust, through the area-wide consultations and 'Parents Have Your Say' groups and taken on board by the centre to help shape its services.

Outstanding partnerships have significantly improved families' outcomes. Sharing the venue with the health team, for example, has fostered excellent working relationships, thus ensuring a quick response to referrals and information sharing. As one of the partners commented, 'Relationships are very strong. There is fantastic cooperation. Centre staff are very supportive of the work we do.' This very effective partnership working, the best use of pooled and targeted resources including staff expertise, has resulted in improved outcomes for users and the centre providing good value for money.

Safeguarding is outstanding and extremely well embedded in all aspects of the centre's services, including in its work in users' homes. Senior leaders are highly effective in ensuring children and families are safe, through rigorous attention to

child protection, vetting and recruitment procedures and the implementation of thorough policies and procedures. Ongoing training for all staff up to Level 3 ensures safeguarding is at the forefront of the centre's work. The centre's strong partnership with social services helps to ensure the safety of children and families, including for those with children with additional needs or who have experienced or are likely to become victims of domestic abuse.

Inclusion and meeting the needs of the most vulnerable groups, including those with disabilities and/or special educational needs, is a priority for the centre. One parent attending the 'Bursting Bubbles' support group for families with children with additional needs appreciated how it helped to raise awareness about disabilities' issues by writing as her feedback 'evaluation' comment, 'Good to be with parents who will accept you and your children because they understand that being different is not wrong. The highlight has to be the sensory room.' Diversity is well celebrated through the use of multicultural teaching resources and bilingual books and the centre's annual 'Multicultural Day', where families have opportunities to learn about different cultures and interact with families from other countries. Last year for example, users had opportunities to dress up in saris, taste Indian food and enjoy music with children playing the Indian drums.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day-to-day management arrangements are clear and understood	2
The effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secure improvement in outcomes	2
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	2
The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties	2
The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults	1
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	1
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	2

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

None

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Highwoods Children's Centre on 9–10 January 2013. We judged the centre as good overall.

You value very much the centre and its services; the way it has supported you and improved the lives' of your families. You told us how your parenting skills have improved and you have gained new knowledge on a number of subjects, including healthy eating, breastfeeding and child development. Your children are making good progress in developing good communication and social skills as well as being encouraged to read books; as one of you parents happily told us, 'My daughter is now very keen on books and attempts to read them. She absolutely loves the music sessions.'

The centre staff have been very successful in making you aware of healthy lifestyles, including through the cooking of healthy meals for your family in 'Food and Health Matters' sessions. We could see for ourselves how much fun you have in the popular fun-packed lively sessions like 'Fun, Food and Fitness' where you spend quality time with your child, enjoying the physical and singing activities as well as interaction with other parents and children. The centre's various activities and services, including the outreach ones in your homes are very well matched to your needs.

Most of you appreciate very much how the centre provides you with good opportunities to form new friendships and this especially helps those of you who feel isolated or who suffered from postnatal depression. We think that the centre offers you good support, particularly for those of you having to cope with immense personal difficulties. The centre also gives you good advice and guidance on parenting and health issues, on finding a job or knowing how to access benefits.

The centre is led and managed well. The centre manager and her staff are highly skilled, ambitious and good at running the centre and the wide range of services they offer and know your local community well. You really value the 'Fantastic, very approachable and helpful' staff as one of you described them to us, who are both keen and work very hard to meet your needs. In providing you with a wide range of quality resources for your children to play with and its skilful use of venues and staff expertise, the centre provides good value for money.

We are pleased that Highwoods Children Centre is an inclusive place, committed to removing barriers. Its promotion of equality and celebration of diversity are good, including in the way it celebrates other cultures through its 'Multicultural Day' event.

We are pleased that the centre is a safe place for you and that there is excellent focus on safeguarding your families. Similarly, we are very glad that the centre's excellent relationships with different agencies including with the health team based in the Bluebell health centre has enabled it to better meet the needs of your families. Your views are welcomed and well used to develop the centre.

The centre staff are keen to improve their services. We have asked the centre to continue with its good work to increase the number of families using the centre especially the families from the Travelling community who are newly settled in the area, so that they too can benefit from its services. We have also asked the centre staff to become more robust in tracking and documenting your achievements whilst accessing centre services, whether it is doing a course or gaining work skills. The centre staff tell us how keen they are to encourage you to join the parent forum once it is restored, and to make sure that you have opportunity to contribute to the work of the advisory board.

We would like to thank everyone who contributed their ideas, came to speak with us, and told us how much you love using the centre and appreciate the work of the staff.

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