

Inspection report for Higher Blackley Children's Centre

Local authority	Manchester
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Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
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Linked school if applicable	Not applicable
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	EY345251 Tiddlywinks

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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.

An inspection of the registered early years/childcare provision was carried out at the same time as the inspection of the centre under section 49 of the Childcare Act 2006. The report of this inspection is available on our website www.ofsted.gov.uk.

This inspection was carried out by one additional inspector and one Early Years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the centre leader and frontline staff, members of the advisory board, representatives of the local authority, representatives of a wide range of agencies that work in partnership with the centre, the former children's centre teacher, and many parents, both individually and in groups.

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

Information about the centre

Higher Blackley is a Phase One centre which was designated in March 2007. It is managed directly by Manchester City Council. Governance is provided by an advisory board which comprises a wide range of stakeholders, including parents.

The centre serves an area with high levels of disadvantage on the northern outskirts of Manchester. The large majority of its reach area is among the 20% most disadvantaged areas in the country, with pockets among the 5% and 1% most deprived areas. The majority of families is White British but increasing numbers belong to a range of minority ethnic groups. Most recent figures indicate that there are 1002 children within the reach area aged under five years. Over 40% of households are headed by a lone adult. Around one quarter of children lives in households claiming tax benefits and well over one third lives in families where no adult is in work. The proportion of children living in poverty is almost double the national average. Most children's levels of skill on entry to Early Years provision are much lower than those expected for their age.

After a period of unsettled leadership, a new head of centre was appointed in March 2012. She also leads the neighbouring Charlestown Children’s Centre. The two centres operate in close, informal partnership but as separate institutions. There is one outreach worker and one receptionist, both of whom took up post after the head of centre had. In 2011, the post of children’s centre teacher was disestablished. There has been recent, significant development of the local area, with the building of a new library and adult education centre, and two large supermarkets. Residents have access to much green space locally, between housing estates and including Heaton Park.

Working in partnership with a wide range of other agencies and professionals, the centre provides the full core offer. Antenatal clinics as well as other health-related sessions operate at the centre. Adult education courses such as parenting and ‘Ready for School’ are also run at the centre. It provides general ‘Stay-and-Play’ sessions as well as sessions for specific groups such as teenage parents, grandparents, and families with disabled children. Outreach staff provide one-to-one support and help families to access other services in the community.

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

‘Some days we would not have known who to turn to without the children’s centre staff. If they weren’t here we would struggle.’ These words from one parent typify those of many. Their views, that the staff provide timely, useful and sensitive help that is tailored very well to their specific needs, support the inspection judgement that the centre meets the needs of local families well. Good quality provision, leadership and management lead to those children and adults who use the centre’s services making good progress in developing the skills to lead healthy, safe and increasingly independent lives.

All users speak positively about the way that staff seek their views and listen to them. This is particularly true of the outreach worker who works tirelessly and successfully to help families improve their current situation and future well-being. The centre works in close

partnership with a wide range of other agencies to streamline the support for families, although the links with local primary schools are less productive. The provision of antenatal clinics on site offers a good opportunity to introduce prospective parents to the other services available through the centre. Registration procedures, ably administered by the receptionist, are improving the quality of information that families provide about their skills and needs so that the right levels of support can be targeted at an early stage. The centre ensures equality of opportunity for all, including for disabled people or those of different ethnicity.

Breastfeeding rates are improving and levels of obesity and dental decay among young children are falling. Arrangements to ensure the safety of children are robust. Parents, staff, volunteers and other professionals are all clear that this is a priority for the centre. The skills that local children acquire by the end of Reception are rising, although the attainment gap between the 20% lowest-achieving and other children is too wide. The planning of some sessions run at the centre does not provide a strong enough platform on which to build children's developing skills. The centre is very encouraging of volunteers and they support its work well. Knowledgeable and persistent advice and support successfully enable families to take better charge of their economic situation, with some moving on to training or employment. However, despite all this success, the numbers attending some activities, especially from among male carers, are relatively low.

The centre leader uses well the growing amount of available data, for example about different levels of need within the community and the engagement of different groups of potential users, to target the centre's resources. Day-to-day and quarterly checking of the centre's impact and adaptation of provision are good but longer-term evaluation and strategic planning are not focussed sharply enough to be of maximum value. Similarly, while members of the advisory board find their meetings useful as a forum for exchanging information, they do not fulfil their governance role sufficiently well. Despite this, centre staff share a clear vision for how they wish to improve the well-being of local young children. They provide a dynamism to the centre's activities which leads to improved outcomes for families and confirms the centre's good capacity to improve further.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Take action to help reduce the gap in achievement at the end of Reception between the lowest-achieving 20% and other children by:
 - ensuring that all group activities are planned well and capitalise on the opportunity to develop children's skills
 - working in closer partnership with local primary schools
 - increasing users' participation in activities, especially that of male carers.

- Further strengthen the leadership and management by:
 - making self-evaluation and development-planning documents less unwieldy and more sharply focussed on the desired impact of any planned actions
 - increasing the effectiveness of the advisory board in holding the centre to account and supporting its strategic direction.

How good are outcomes for families?

2

Comments such as, 'We wouldn't have coped without the centre staff but don't feel dependent on them now we have learnt from them', clearly demonstrate the centre's good impact on families' and children's well-being.

The incidence of mothers continuing to breastfeed their babies at six to eight weeks has increased by one third during the current year to 38%. Support from a smoking-cessation advisor has recently led to four centre users setting 'quit dates' and eight registering to ensure that their homes are smoke-free. The advisor describes this as 'a good number for us'. Healthy snacks for children attending groups, as well as sessions to promote healthy, economical cooking and summer-time 'Super Stars' sessions at the local school-based community facility, further enhance families' adoption of healthy lifestyles.

Close working between, for example, health professionals including psychologists, members of the early intervention team, those providing benefits and employment advice, and centre staff creates a network of support for those families described by one professional as 'on the edge of care'. For example, a midwife's referral of one family seen at the antenatal clinic led to a home visit, on the same day, by the outreach worker and the setting in train of a range of different support. Case studies and discussion with parents confirm that good use of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) has led to reductions in the levels of risk for children and some no longer being subject to a child protection plan. Good systems and sharing of information clearly highlight the numbers of looked-after children locally and identification of any who are not yet known to the centre leads to swift action and support. Over 80% of families known to have disabled children are actively engaged in the centre's activities. One parent of a child with autism commented on how relaxed he is during sessions, while others greatly appreciate practical advice about, for example, biting or sleeping. A large proportion of users successfully completes parent survival courses. The recovery rate of 50% for those supported through the psychology service, to which centre users have quick access, is around 10 percentage points higher than the national rate.

In 2012, the proportion of local children developing the expected skills for their age by the end of Reception rose to be broadly in line with the national average. Clear evidence shows that those who attended the on-site nursery or crèches develop higher levels of skill than others. However, the gap in achievement between the majority and the lowest 20% is more than six percentage points wider than national figures. Users enjoy the activities and provide very positive feedback about them. They behave well, show good awareness of safety

issues and are keen to become involved. Children confidently explore the good quality resources indoors and outside, and settle well for their snack. Adults willingly tidy up and respond to consultations about, for example, the types and timings of future activities. However, not all regularly turn up for the activities that the centre does put on, particularly male carers.

Volunteers, who are very diverse in terms of age, ethnicity and experience, help to run group sessions and provide valuable feedback and ideas. They keenly participate in the advisory board and its sub-groups, although they do not have a clear understanding of its purpose. Members of the 'Fun Mums' group for young mothers organised a colour-themed Halloween event, with staff helping to ensure that the images would not cause upset and that the food on offer was healthy. Records show that the centre's work helps users to grow in confidence and develop aspirations that motivate them to pursue courses at college or find employment. The centre played a significant role during recent regeneration activity which contributed to 46% of those recruited to work in local supermarkets living in the immediate area. In its efforts to secure the continued well-being of children, the centre is also being proactive in ensuring that families have access to good quality, accurate information about the impact of imminent changes to the benefits system.

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	2
The extent to which all children and parents, including those from target groups, enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	2
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	2
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

Decisions about what activities to provide are firmly based on consultation with centre users and information gained through analysis of need both individually, as families register and talk about their circumstances, and for the reach area. Well-targeted actions, including innovative use of the youth offending team, mean that active engagement of families living in those areas identified as the most disadvantaged is higher than for other areas. The provision ensures that a majority of lone parents, teenage parents and those belonging to minority ethnic groups all have regular contact. Many activities, such as support for those with communication problems, are well-structured and track children's progress well. After

the 'Ready for School' course one parent commented, 'He used to play with play dough and I thought it was just for fun but now I know it is helping him with his writing.' However, planning for the 'Stay-and-Play' sessions focuses more on resources and activities than children's development of skills. Opportunities are missed to involve parents in identifying their children's progress and what they and the centre might provide next to meet their needs.

Good quality care, guidance and support underpin all of the centre's work. Strong, timely liaison between a wide range of different professionals, with the centre acting as the hub, provides well-co-ordinated action that helps families to improve both children's and adults' lives. Good quality record-keeping helps to maintain the momentum of support. Parents feel confident to talk openly about their difficulties, knowing they will be listened to and supported. One said, 'My outreach worker has taught me it's OK to make mistakes but it's never too late to learn from them.'

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

Good quality leadership and management by the head of centre and local authority staff are driving forward improvements in both the quality of provision and the outcomes for families. The head of centre is reflective and clear-sighted about the centre's strengths and areas for development. She is persistent in pursuing information, such as the main causes for children's attendance at hospital accident and emergency departments, which can help to guide any actions taken. The availability of increasingly useful data, combined with clear systems of accountability and supervision, ensure that resources are targeted well to support those in most need. The centre provides good value for money.

Robust safeguarding arrangements include regular risk assessments and checks of adults' suitability to work with children and vulnerable adults. Good quality training ensures that volunteers and staff are all aware of their responsibilities and the appropriate actions to take with regard to safeguarding concerns. Close co-operation between different agencies leads to a swift, effective response when necessary. Good quality support for disabled children and those with special educational needs enables them to, for example, transfer to childcare provision in a well-structured, timely manner. Displays promote positive images of diversity and the festivals of different cultures are celebrated.

Good quality partnerships with a wide range of different agencies and professionals greatly enhance the provision for children and adults so that the support given to them is cohesive and well-targeted. However, there are few links with local schools to support children's skills' development, particularly those of the lowest-achieving children. Staff regularly seek users' views and ideas about the centre's work, and are proactive in encouraging them to become engaged in activities and through volunteering. Partners value the opportunities to share information at meetings of the advisory board and its sub-groups but the governance arrangements are not yet sufficiently effective in either holding the centre to account for the quality of its provision or helping to shape its strategic development. The centre's self-evaluation and development-planning documentation is cumbersome and fails to provide a sharp enough focus on key priorities or clear enough criteria by which to evaluate success.

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 secures 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	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	2
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

The findings of the concurrent inspection of the privately run, onsite childcare provision, 'Tiddlywinks', were taken into account when making the inspection judgements.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Higher Blackley Children's Centre on 30 and 31 January 2013. We judged the centre as good overall.

We were very pleased to be able to meet and speak with so many of you. Thank you for giving up your time and helping us to understand what a difference the centre makes to your families' lives. One of you told us that, 'My outlook is different now and my relationship with my kids is loads better. I enjoy spending time with my son as opposed to being stressed out with his behaviour.' It is comments such as these that really show the value of the centre's work.

Support from a wide range of different agencies is helping you to take charge of your lives and improve the well-being of your families. Levels of breastfeeding are going up. Levels of obesity and tooth decay among your children are going down. More of you are signing up to set 'quit-smoking dates', or at least to make sure that your homes remain smoke-free. Well done for taking all these steps to improve your own and your children's health.

You told us that you feel safe in the centre and confident to share any concerns with staff because you are sure that they will offer you good support that helps you to cope with whatever challenges you face. You understand that children's safety and well-being are the top priorities for centre staff and you appreciate the steps they take to make sure that you and your children do keep safe.

The skills that local children develop by the end of their time in Reception have improved over recent years and the children's centre has played its part in this. However, although most children are doing well, the difference is too great between the skills that the majority develops and the skills of those who find it more difficult to learn. To help with this we have asked the centre to do three things:

- to improve the planning for some of the 'Stay-and-Play' sessions, maybe involving you more in deciding what your child needs next to, for example, help him or her move on from crawling to walking, or from babbling to forming clear words
- to improve its links with local primary schools so that everyone is working together to improve children's skills
- to encourage more of you, especially male carers, to attend activities.

You can really help with this last one because it is such a waste if you do not turn up for sessions, even the ones that you have suggested, and especially when staff have asked for your ideas.

It is great that a good number of you choose to volunteer, for example, helping to run groups or supporting new mums with breastfeeding. We know that those families who have disabled children really appreciate being able to share experiences and possible solutions

with others who face similar challenges. Numbers are building up well at the 'Fun Mums' and grandparents' groups, both of which are supported by volunteers.

Some of you also attend advisory board meetings as do many of the professionals, such as health workers, who contribute to the centre's work. We know that you all find these meetings very useful for sharing information about the main issues facing your area and the different activities on offer. However, the real purpose of the advisory board is to make sure that the centre is catering as well as possible for local children under five years and their families. It should also be helping staff to plan actions that are designed to improve outcomes for children over the longer term. At the moment it is not fulfilling this role as well as it should so we have asked for this to be improved. Finally, we have asked centre leaders to develop more useful ways of checking the centre's strengths and weaker areas, and planning for its future development. At the moment, there is so much writing that it is difficult to pick out the really important information.

The support that the centre provides to help you with mental health issues is good. You also receive good support in a crisis, such as with changes in benefits or difficulties with housing. Many of you grow in confidence through your links with the centre which means that some of you move on successfully to training and employment. Parents' comments to us during the inspection vividly show how well the centre helps you to take charge of your lives.

We wish you well for the future.

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