

# Children's Centre at Stephen Freeman

Freeman Road, Didcot, Oxfordshire, OX11 7BZ

**Inspection date** 2–3 July 2013

| <b>Overall effectiveness</b>                               | <b>This inspection:</b> | <b>Good</b>              | <b>2</b> |
|--|-------------------------|--------------------------|----------|
|  | Previous inspection:    | Not previously inspected |          |
| Access to services by young children and families          | Good                    |                          | 2        |
| The quality of practice and services                       | Good                    |                          | 2        |
| The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management | Good                    |                          | 2        |

## Summary of key findings for children and families

### This is a good centre.

- The centre is effectively reaching the large majority of local families, including those most in need of support. Those living in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, teenage mothers and vulnerable families all benefit from regularly attending its good quality services.
- Support for individual families, particularly in times of crisis, is exceptionally well managed between the centre and social care colleagues. Time after time, parents were keen to tell inspectors how the centre has had a positive impact in their lives.
- The centre is an integral part of the local primary school, located at the heart of a rapidly growing community. Day-to-day management of staff is highly effective. Very good use is made of volunteers in the centre, especially those working towards qualifications in childcare. Governance is effective and includes working with leaders to ensure that the centre's service are of good quality and reach the families most in need.
- Parents are provided with good-quality advice about benefits and 'better off calculations'. They receive detailed individual guidance which helps to reduce barriers to employment and, in some cases, significantly improves family income.

### It is not outstanding because:

- Initial and sustained breastfeeding rates are too low. Despite centre staff being trained as 'breastfeeding buddies', and the centre having good resources to encourage breastfeeding, levels are declining and remain below levels seen nationally.
- Not enough fathers are in regular contact with the centre despite the centre running a 'Dad's Zone Play Session' monthly on a Saturday morning.
- Centre links with employment services and adult learning providers could be significantly improved to enable more adults to benefit from the services, advice, guidance and support provided by these organisations.

**Information about this inspection**

The inspection of this children’s centre was carried out under Part 3A of the Childcare Act 2006 as amended by the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009.

This inspection was carried out by two additional inspectors.

The inspectors held meetings with senior leaders and managers in the local authority, health, education and social care partners, parents, outreach workers, early years practitioners, volunteers and representatives of the advisory board.

The inspectors visited the centre and adjoining school.

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

**Inspection team**

|                       |                                      |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Alan Comerford-Dunbar | Additional Inspector, Lead Inspector |
| Judith Harrison       | Additional Inspector                 |

## Full report

### Information about the centre

The Children's Centre at Stephen Freeman opened in May 2007. It is a phase two centre which, together with two other children's centres, provides services to families across the whole of Didcot and the surrounding villages. The full core offer is provided through a range of supporting services, including health support, adult courses and workshops. The centre is co-located with Stephen Freeman Community School (URN:123079) which is subject to a separate inspection.

Located on a large school campus, the centre building is a conversion and extension of the existing school, consisting of three large playrooms, two kitchen areas, and office space, including a main office and managers' office; the centre also benefits from two large outdoor playing areas. The community the centre serves includes Didcot town centre and three surrounding villages. Families living in the reach area are mainly of White British heritage, with some families of a broad range of other ethnic backgrounds.

Currently 635 children under the age of five years live in the centre's reach area. The housing stock typically is social housing with some privately rented and privately owned; 23% of families are from workless families. The majority of children enter early years provision with a range of skills and knowledge just below those expected for their age, particularly in communication, language, literacy and personal, social and emotional development.

The centre is managed by the governing body of the school on behalf of the local authority. It also has an advisory board made up of representatives from the local community, professional agencies and parents. The advisory board has an overarching responsibility for three centres in the Didcot area; however, day-to-day management of the centre is independent of the other two centres.

### What does the centre need to do to improve further?

- Increase the engagement of fathers by:
  - finding out why more of this group are not accessing services
  - refining services as appropriate in the light of findings
  - publicising more widely the benefits gained by those who already enjoy attending the centre.
- Increase the number of adults who benefit from receiving advice and guidance about employment and education opportunities by:
  - working more closely with colleagues from employment providers to establish more frequent opportunities for adults to meet with Jobcentre Plus staff whilst at the centre
  - working more closely with colleagues from adult learning to widen and increase the number of courses readily available to adults using the centre.
- Strengthen its work with health partners and, in particular, midwives and local hospitals to increase breastfeeding rates so that improvement targets are met or bettered by:
  - looking closely at existing services to see which are having the best impact on increasing breastfeeding rates
  - sharing information regularly and targeting resources more precisely.

## Inspection judgements

### Access to services by young children and families

Good

- Centre staff know the local area well and make very good use of all available information to match services to local needs. An effective balance exists between services provided for all families and those for families who are most in need, which ensures all sessions are well attended by users. A large majority of families are reached by the centre, with over 90% of children living in the most deprived neighbourhoods regularly accessing services.
- Almost all eligible two-year-old children take up their free entitlement to early years education and are successfully helped to become prepared for school. Parents benefit very well from attending activities that help them give their children the best start and from programmes that are specifically designed to improve their parenting skills.
- Centre outreach workers are effective in engaging teenage mothers, lone parents and children with disabilities. However, the monthly run 'Dad's Zone' fails to attract the majority of fathers to the centre. Too little research has taken place to find out why fathers are not engaging with the centre.
- Key staff members have extensive local knowledge and many years of experience working in the community the centre serves. Parents trust staff and state that the centre is 'a safe haven' and 'a place where problems get solved'. Children enjoy playing in the well-equipped, spacious outdoor play areas.

### The quality of practice and services

Good

- Parents speak highly of the services offered by the centre, especially the more targeted work such as the post-natal depression group, the 'PICL project' (Parents Involved in their Children's Learning), and paediatric first aid. Sessions known locally as 'Drop-ins' are clearly valued by families, who speak highly of the non-judgemental support given by the centre staff.
- Highly effective systems are in place to monitor children and families who attend the centre. This includes learning journals for children attending 'Drop-ins', crèches and 'Wrap-around' provision. The centre is developing effective tracking of children as they move into school. Children living in the centre reach area attain higher than national levels at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage and the gap between the lowest attaining children and their peers is narrowing.
- The centre coordinates high quality training and guidance for all childcare providers in the area. It works closely with a highly effective childminding network, which results in good quality childcare being offered, particularly for the funded two-year nursery places. Good links are made across the early years providers to ensure good quality provision for children. The centre teacher has well-established links with the local authority early years advisory team and works effectively to support high quality practice across the centre's reach area.
- Children benefit from highly effective teaching support. Good systems are in place to monitor the progress of children and families who attend the centre. This includes learning journals for children attending drop-ins, crèches and 'Wrap-around' provision. More vulnerable children have detailed case files with effective action plans and report tracking. There is also a strong children's centre childminding network, with high quality childcare being offered.
- Those whose circumstances make them vulnerable and other key target groups, such as women living with domestic abuse, develop a very good understanding of how they can remain safe. Staff make good use of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) and multi-agency referral forms to identify and respond effectively to reduce the risk of harm. Case study evidence demonstrates the centre's success in taking appropriate and timely action to keep children safe.
- Staff confidently give advice and guidance to families. Appropriate referral to other agencies ensures that users receive the best of advice. Families receive very good support in times of crisis as staff are confident when dealing with the complex needs of families and work well with a variety of partners, but especially social care workers, to support families in most need.
- Strategies are in place to support local health initiatives such as reducing obesity and improving

breastfeeding rates and oral health. There is high uptake in immunisations across the centre area and obesity rates are below national and local averages. However, initial and sustained breastfeeding rates are low and reducing. Closer links are needed with all appropriate health services to develop strategies to bring about better breastfeeding rates.

### **The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management**

Good

- Governance arrangements are effective and well embedded. The advisory board has a firm grasp of what is happening in the centre and ensures that the needs of families across Didcot are effectively met. The local authority sets high expectations for the centre and makes regular checks on its performance. It uses complex data to set challenging but realistic targets to support the centre's journey of improvement. Self-evaluation is accurate, and staff and partners are clear about the centre's strengths, weaknesses and future priorities.
- Relationships among centre users and with staff are extremely positive. The centre's ethos promotes inclusion well, and, as a result, parents from different social backgrounds feel welcomed and involved in centre life. Although the centre evaluates its services through consultation with parents, not enough parents are sufficiently involved in running and governing the centre.
- Children with circumstances that make them most vulnerable, including those subject to child protection plans, those deemed to be children in need and looked after children, receive good support.
- Families receive good quality early help through the effective use of the Common Assessment Framework processes and good multi-agency working. All staff are appropriately recruited and vetted. Staff training is appropriate and up to date and all legal requirements are effectively met.
- Very good use is made of the wide range of resources available. All activities offered are run to capacity and there are often waiting lists. All activities, including commissioned services, are evaluated and monitored to secure high-quality provision. The centre uses very good quality resources and equipment, which are greatly appreciated by parents and children; in particular, the outdoor play area is a wonderful resource for energetic children.
- Partnership working is strong, especially with social care and local schools. Benefit advice provided by staff is detailed and presented in an innovative and interesting way that helps adults to understand their options. Staff are confident when directing parents to other agencies, knowing that their needs will be addressed. However, centre links with employment services and adult learning providers could be significantly improved to enable more adults to benefit from the services, advice, guidance and support provided by these organisations.

**What inspection judgements mean**

| Grade   | Judgement            | Description  |
|---------|----------------------|--|
| Grade 1 | Outstanding          | Practice consistently reflects the highest aspirations for children and their families and as a result inequalities are reducing rapidly and gaps are closing.                                 |
| Grade 2 | Good                 | Practice enables most children and their families to access good quality services that improve children's wellbeing and achieve the stated outcomes for families.                              |
| Grade 3 | Requires improvement | Performance is not as good as it might reasonably be expected to be in one or more key areas.  |
| Grade 4 | Inadequate           | The needs of children and families in its area are not being met and/or the leaders and managers are not providing sufficient challenge to bring about improvement to the quality of services. |

**Children's centre details**

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <b>Unique reference number</b>                                     | 20696                                     |
| <b>Local authority</b>   | Oxfordshire                               |
| <b>Inspection number</b>   | 421451                                    |
| <b>Managed by</b>  | The local authority                       |
| <b>Approximate number of children under five in the reach area</b> | 635                                       |
| <b>Centre leader</b>   | Mandy Whitaker                            |
| <b>Date of previous inspection</b>                                 | Not previously inspected                  |
| <b>Telephone number</b>  | 01235 812969                              |
| <b>Email address</b>   | chcentre.2594@stephen-freeman.oxon.sch.uk |

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