

Stotfold Children's Centre

Red Bear Children's Centre, St Mary's CofE Academy, Stotfold, Hitchin, SG5 4DL

Inspection date 10–11 July 2013

Overall effectiveness	This inspection:	Good	2
	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.

- Families are highly satisfied with the quality of services at the centre. Parents from priority groups, including vulnerable children, mothers suffering post-natal depression, victims of domestic violence, workless families, families suffering from isolation or mental ill health, say how much they appreciate the positive early help from family support and outreach staff.
- The centre, in close partnership with the school, has a very good understanding of the needs of the community and targets its services effectively to help those most in need of support.
- The large majority of families with young children that live in the area, including those from priority groups, are registered and using services regularly at the centre.
- Families, particularly those in crisis, benefit from well coordinated support from a wide range of partners. Case studies clearly demonstrate that good safeguarding arrangements, and the timely sharing of information, helps to reduce the risk of harm to children.
- Parents from priority groups improve their parenting skills through well-planned courses. As a result, they have a better understanding of how to support their children's development through play and how to keep them safe and healthy.
- Leadership, including governance, is good and the centre is well managed. Careful monitoring and ambitious target setting means that the performance of the centre is continually improving.

It is not outstanding because:

- The local authority does not assist the centre sufficiently by providing precise data about some groups, such as lone parents and fathers living in the area.
- Despite efforts by the centre, it has not secured an affordable venue in Fairfield Park, in order to provide families living there with access to local services.
- The centre does not have sufficient feedback on the progress and achievements of the adults it refers to adult education partners in order to monitor the full impact on improving families' economic well-being.

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 three Additional Inspectors.

The inspectors held meetings with the centre manager, head teacher and chair of governors of St Mary's CofE Academy, centre staff, officers from the local authority and a range of partners. These included representatives from health and employment services, education, voluntary organisations, and training providers. They also met with parents, volunteers and representatives of the advisory board.

Inspectors observed activities at the 'Red Bear' site in Stotfold and at Etonbury Academy.

They observed the centre's work and looked at a range of documentation including the self-evaluation form, action plan, a sample of case studies and files, minutes of meetings, parental satisfaction surveys, safeguarding policies and procedures and a variety of assessment and planning files.

Inspection team

Jean-Marie Blakeley, Lead inspector	Additional inspector
Deborah Sanders	Additional inspector
Maureen Deary	Additional inspector

Full report

Information about the centre

Central Bedfordshire Local Authority has commissioned the governors of St Mary's CofE Academy to manage Stotfold Children's Centre. An advisory board made up of professional partners, parents and community members supports the governors and head teacher in the governance of the centre. During the local authority restructure of children's centres in 2012, the centre merged with Arlesey Meadows Children's Centre.

The centre covers a rural area with key residential areas of Stotfold, Arlesey and Fairfield Park. Following consultation with local families, the centre is branded and known locally as 'Red Bear'. The centre is situated on a site shared with St Mary's CofE Academy and an early years and childcare provider, Poppies Nursery. These are both subject to separate inspections

The centre is staffed by a manager, an outreach support worker, a children's centre practitioner, a children's centre assistant and one administrator.

The local population is predominantly of White British heritage. Overall employment and income levels are high with a low percentage of families living on benefits. Specific areas within Arlesey and Stotfold are described as areas with 'pockets of need'. Many families have recently located to the area for more affordable housing and commute long distances to work.

There are 1,216 children under five years of age living in the area. Local children currently enter school with skills and knowledge at or above those expected for their age. Key target groups identified by the centre include vulnerable children, mothers suffering post-natal depression, victims of domestic violence, workless families, families suffering from isolation or mental ill health.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

- The local authority should ensure the centre has access to precise data about groups, such as lone parents and fathers living in the area to help monitor their take up of services.
- The local authority and partners should help the centre to gain access to an affordable venue in Fairfield Park, in order to provide families with local access to services.
- With adult education partners the centre should keep close checks on the progress and achievements of all adults who access further learning and skills opportunities.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Good

- The determined centre staff work hard to engage the large majority of families in the local area. They target support and advice appropriately and effectively to meet individual families' needs. As a result, most families, particularly those hardest to reach such as those living in isolation or those less likely to engage with activities, use the centre's services.
- Referrals, outreach work, observations and partnerships are all used effectively to identify needs, for example, mothers suffering post-natal depression, and match them to the services they require. In addition, the well-attended services open to all are used very effectively as a filter to identify families such as those experiencing domestic abuse or suffering from mental illness, in order to pinpoint those needing specialist support.
- Close partnerships with childcare providers ensure the good take-up of funded, high quality early education places for disadvantaged children. Targeted two-year-olds attend centre activities regularly and make good progress. As a result, most children are starting school ready to engage in learning.
- The centre's systems for monitoring children's and families' access to services, attendance and

participation clearly demonstrate the good participation levels. Well planned, targeted sessions such as 'Jamie Oliver Cookery' engage vulnerable families in the first steps of learning about nutrition and healthy eating. Many successfully gain qualifications and progress to other learning opportunities.

- Satisfaction surveys and parent feedback show the high satisfaction of families. Outreach venues and the provision of taxis across the area help the majority of families to have easy access to services. However, although the centre has tried hard to negotiate affordable accommodation in Fairfield Park, it has not managed to secure a venue to enable families living there to access local services.

The quality of practice and services

Good

- The centre provides a good balance of specific support work, for example, to help mothers with post natal depression, and services open to all. A very large majority of the families most in need take up the good quality services provided by the centre and its partners. As a result, outcomes for children and adults are rapidly improving, helping to reduce inequalities.
- Drop-in sessions, are used well to assess and identify the needs of priority families and effectively target support. Staff carefully assess children's starting points and track the progress they make while accessing centre services. Data show that when children start school, the majority have made good progress in their learning and development.
- Effective use is made of the Common Assessment Framework procedures to assess and monitor the progress of vulnerable families including children subject to a child protection plan and looked after children. Good support from outreach staff helps many families to move out of crisis situations. Some parents told inspectors that the centre had 'saved their lives'.
- Through partnership with health services, the centre helps promote and improve health outcomes and families' well-being. Parenting programmes are well attended by priority families and are a key strength of the support and guidance the centre provides for adults. For example, parents learn how to cook healthy meals for their families on a small budget and how they can manage their children's behaviour positively.
- Workless families have good access to advice, guidance, education, training and volunteering opportunities to help them get back to work. Case studies clearly demonstrate how the good support from the centre and its partners has helped families from priority groups to gain employment. However, the centre is unable to fully demonstrate the progress made by all adults it refers to its adult education partners as some providers do not share this information with the centre.
- Families are highly satisfied with the quality of services at the centre. Parents say how much they appreciate the early help from family support and outreach staff. Parents continue to engage with the centre, meet new friends and break down the barriers they experience, for example, in relation to isolation and mental depression.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

Good

- The dedicated leadership team knows the centre's strengths and where improvement is needed. As a result of close monitoring and the close targeting of services, registration and engagement levels are high and outcomes for families are increasing year-on-year.
- Safeguarding children and families is a key strength of the centre with effective policies, procedures and practices. Strong partnerships and information sharing with health and social care professionals help to keep families safe. The needs of children subject to child protection plans and children in need are particularly well met and the Common Assessment Framework is used well to coordinate effective early support.
- The centre and its services are used well by families. Staff have a good knowledge of families and have genuine interest in their welfare. As a result, families speak very highly of the support they receive saying it has transformed their lives, improved their parenting skills and saved them from

isolation, post-natal depression and mental ill health.

- The centre deploys its small and effective staff team efficiently and draws on an extensive range of partners particularly well to provide a wide range of services that meet the needs of families.
- The centre demonstrates its clear commitment to inclusion through the effective targeting of children and families. Health outcomes, such as the level of childhood obesity and sustained breastfeeding rates are both more positive than seen nationally. In addition, the proportion of children who achieve a good level of development by the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage is higher than seen nationally.
- The governing body and the advisory board watches over the work of the centre carefully and are clear about its overall effectiveness and its performance. Regular reports ensure they know about the high impact of services on meeting the families most in need, in closing the gap and reducing inequalities.
- The local authority monitors the performance of the centre adequately to ensure that it meets the locally agreed priorities. It knows how well the centre is performing in meeting its core purpose and in setting targets for improvement. However, it does not sufficiently help the centre by providing precise data on some groups such as lone parents and fathers.

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

Unique reference number	22954
Local authority	Central Bedfordshire
Inspection number	423224
Managed by	The governing body of St Mary's CofE Academy on behalf of the local authority.
Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	1,216
Centre manager	Jess Milne
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Telephone number	01462 730623
Email address	rbmanager@cbc.beds.sch.uk

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