

# Lowton Children's Centre

Lowton Junior and Infant School, Newton Road, Lowton, WA3 2AW

**Inspection date** 17–18 July 2013

<b>Overall effectiveness</b>	<b>This inspection:</b> Previous inspection:	<b>Requires improvement</b>	<b>3</b>
		Not previously inspected	
Access to services by young children and families		Requires improvement	3
The quality of practice and services		Requires improvement	3
The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management		Requires improvement	3

## Summary of key findings for children and families

### This is a centre that requires improvement. It is not good because:

- Although a large majority of families in the area engage with the centre, recent cuts in funding have resulted in a reduction in the range of universal activities available. In addition, not all partners routinely share the impact of their work with the centre.
- A limited range of activities are offered at the centre and these are not always well attended and vary in quality. Centre staff signpost families to a range of services which include parenting courses. However, there are no reliable systems in place to track how attendance at these services helps to improve parents' lives.
- Adults have too few opportunities to access adult learning or employability services. The centre does not track whether those that do seek out these services are attending or whether their economic well-being has improved.
- The collaborative leadership committee do not sufficiently monitor and quality assure the depth of the centre's own provision, or that of the local services that it commissions and uses. As a result, rapid improvements are not being made.
- Although parents' views are captured through questionnaires, they have yet to have a voice at a more strategic level to help shape services and determine the priorities of the centre.

### The centre has the following strengths:

- The safety of families at home and in the centre is a vital part of the centre's work. The safeguarding of children and adults whose circumstances make them vulnerable, such as families in crisis, is very good. The small dedicated staff team work well to build trusting relationships with these families to ensure they get the vital support that they need.
- The take-up of funded early education places for children aged two, three and four years is good. Careful tracking and partnerships with childcare providers ensure children attend regularly and make good progress in their learning. As a result, most children start school ready to engage in learning.

### 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, members of staff and partner professionals from other agencies. Discussions were held with members of the governing body, representatives from the local authority and parents.

The inspectors visited activities that took place at the centre and at a community venue.

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

### Inspection team

Janet Stacey	Additional Inspector, Lead Inspector
Qaisra Shahraz Ahmad	Additional Inspector

## Full report

### Information about the centre

Lowton Children's Centre is a stand-alone phase three centre. It operates from Lowton Junior and Infant School in Wigan, Lancashire. The centre is managed by the local authority with governance provided by a collaborative leadership committee which includes a range of stakeholders. The centre has been through a turbulent time since its registration, which resulted in several staff changes at senior leadership level. The local authority has recently conducted a public consultation to determine the future of the centre and to agree which services are to be continued.

The centre does not have any linked childcare provision but works closely with the private and voluntary groups in the area as well as with four local schools, one of which provides nursery education. These provisions are subject to separate inspection arrangements and these reports are available on the Ofsted website: [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk). A large majority of children living in the area currently enter early years provision with skills and knowledge expected for their age. The centre provides a range of health services and signposts parents to other agencies and provisions.

There are approximately 400 children aged under five years living in the area. The centre serves a generally affluent area with small pockets of high deprivation, with the Hesketh Meadows area being one of the 30% most deprived communities in the country. The main social issues affecting these areas include a high percentage of families living on workless benefits and adults achieving lower than the national average qualifications. For those in employment, wages paid locally are also lower than the national average. The majority of families living in the area are of White British Heritage.

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

- Ensure there is a balance of universal and targeted services so that staff continue to build relationships with families and identify any issues or problems families may be facing before they reach crisis point.
- Improve the effectiveness of leadership, governance and management by:
  - tracking which families are using services and ensuring services are based on a sound analysis of need
  - monitoring the impact these services have on improving outcomes
  - ensuring that the impact of the work of partners is shared with the centre.
- Increase adults' chances of future employment through access to training and qualifications based on their identified needs and interests, and monitor the impact on their economic independence.
- Build on current systems and procedures for consultation with parents by engaging them in governance arrangements so that they fully understand the centre's purpose, and contribute towards the shaping of service delivery and the driving of improvement.

### Inspection judgements

#### Access to services by young children and families

Requires improvement

- Whilst there is some collation and use of centre-specific data, evaluations of activities are not systematic or rigorous enough. For example, the centre monitors which users are accessing different services, but this is not used effectively enough to understand how successful the centre is in meeting families' needs.
- The centre has worked hard to engage families and they have been successful in this. However, due to budget cuts the staff have reduced many of the popular and well-attended courses at the centre. Some parents report their sadness at the loss of these services, particularly as there is very little in the area to replace them. Consequently, users are starting to drift away from the centre and a route for parents to informally seek advice is being lost.
- Home visits form part of the effective outreach support that assists families who are most in need

and find accessing the centre difficult. The outreach team know the community well, including its most vulnerable groups. They target support and advice appropriately, particularly for those families in crisis, and ensure that parents are involved in the assessment of their own needs.

- The centre works closely with the local health clinic and the health visitor shares pertinent information to help identify users' needs. The support for expectant mothers is less strong as relationships have only just been established with the midwifery team.
- The centre works effectively with partners to identify the disadvantaged two-year-olds entitled to free education. This has led to the large majority of those children taking up free places. All children aged three and four years in the area take up their nursery places because staff help parents to understand the benefits for children of early education.

### **The quality of practice and services**

Requires improvement

- Some activities and services offered are of good quality. However, the range of activities offered is limited and levels of attendance are sometimes low. This restricts the impact of the centre's work on outcomes for children and on reducing inequalities and improving life chances.
- Adults have very few opportunities to develop the basic skills and qualifications that they need to enter the workforce. As a consequence, some children in the area continue to live in disadvantaged households. The centre supports parents to take on volunteer roles at the centre but numbers are low.
- Good links with partners, such as the health visitors and 'Active Living', help families start to improve their attitudes towards leading a healthy lifestyle. More women are now breastfeeding their children and the number of mothers smoking at delivery are very low. Whilst the centre has seen obesity in children in Reception classes below national averages, numbers have started to increase. This coincides with the time when the physical activities that used to be held at the centre have ceased.
- The centre is a safe environment and there is good attention to keeping users safe through regular advice and signposting to other agencies. However, the extent to which the activities and opportunities parents are signposted to, to meet their needs, is not sufficiently evaluated.
- Users say they feel safe at the centre and risk assessments are carried out conscientiously at the start of each group session.
- The centre works very closely with local childcare providers to make sure assessments and observation of children are very reliable and are used well to help them make at least good progress, whatever their starting points. Data held at the centre strongly suggest that, from some low starting points, children are well prepared for school and the gap in all children's achievements is closing more rapidly than the rate seen nationally.
- Sessions run by outreach staff, such as 'Crafty Kids' and 'Sensory Play', help to strengthen parents' relationships with their children and provides them with fun ideas of how to use simple, everyday activities to support children's learning at home.
- Opportunities for parents to improve their parenting skills are offered through signposting to other agencies. However, the centre is not tracking whether these families are learning practical strategies to help them confidently manage their children's behaviour and build strong, healthy relationships with their children.

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

Requires improvement

- Governance is unsettled because the current re-structure means meetings have recently been put on hold. However, governors involved in the inspection confirmed their awareness of data and explained how staff performance is managed. Due to effective self-evaluation the leadership team are well aware of where improvements need to be made in the centre's performance and in reducing any inequalities, although this is not always occurring quickly enough. Parents are not represented on the advisory board and their contribution to shaping the centre's performance or

delivery is limited.

- The local authority provides satisfactory support in terms of accountability and decision-making through the annual performance review and sets suitable targets for the centre to achieve. Staff are suitably supervised and attend a good range of training to enhance their existing abilities and develop new skills.
- The centre's use of resources and impact on improving outcomes for local families is too variable. After a turbulent time the senior staff structure is now more stable. However, uncertainties regarding the future operational services at the centre and budget cuts have meant that the centre is not offering the same level of services as it was when it was first designated.
- Some partners work well with the centre and share data and information on a regular basis. However, this is inconsistent. The relationships with adult education, Jobcentre Plus and the midwifery service are not as strong as other partnerships. As a consequence, the centre is not in a position to fully assess users' needs and put full and effective support in place to improve families' lives.
- Centre leaders follow local authority procedures for staff recruitment, vetting and safeguarding, and all staff attend appropriate child protection training. Staff are trained in the use of the Common Assessment Framework. Families at risk, particularly those experiencing domestic violence, or subject to a child protection plan, are well safeguarded. Dedicated outreach staff keep detailed records of the support they offer and the meetings that take place with other partners.

*What inspection judgements mean*

<b>Grade</b>	<b>Judgement</b>	<b>Description</b>
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.

*Select details*

<b>Unique reference number</b>	21873
<b>Local authority</b>	Wigan
<b>Inspection number</b>	421476
<b>Managed by</b>	The local authority
<b>Approximate number of children under five in the reach area</b>	395
<b>Centre leader</b>	Alison Davies
<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	Not previously inspected
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