

Flitwick Children's Centre

Main Base, c/o Templefield Lower School Site, Malham Close, Flitwick, MK45 1AJ

Inspection date	25–26 September 2013		
Overall effectiveness	This inspection:	Inadequate	4
	Previous inspection:	Not applicable	
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		Inadequate	4

Summary of key findings for children and families

This is a centre that is inadequate.

- The centre lacks the resources to adequately deliver services needed for such a wide reach area. Staff are too stretched and are not helping enough children and families with identified needs to access and benefit from the services.
- Leaders and managers are not effectively using data and other information to plan services to promote engagement with the high numbers of children and families in the local area.
- There are not enough courses or opportunities provided to enable adults to improve their learning and skills so that they have better prospects for further training, education or to get jobs.
- Self-evaluation and performance monitoring systems are not used effectively to set challenging targets to promote improvement.
- The advisory board is poorly attended by key partners, lacks parental representation and has not been adequately supported in how to measure the performance of the centre. As a result, the advisory board is unable to guide and challenge the centre to make the necessary improvements.

This centre has the following strengths:

- The acting centre co-ordinator has quickly gained the confidence of a new staff team and local partners. New priorities have been identified and strategies are quickly being implemented to improve the quality and impact of services. Services for families with babies are a key strength.
- The small numbers of families who do use the services receive support that is either good or outstanding and the centre clearly makes a very positive difference to their lives.
- The recent take-up of free entitlement to early education has improved significantly.
- Safeguarding arrangements are good and safety is actively promoted. The centre works well with relevant partners to reduce the risk of harm to families and provides a welcoming safe haven to those seeking help.

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 and telephone conversations with the centre co-ordinator and her line manager from Action for Children, the Early Intervention Team, local authority representatives and a range of partners. These included representatives from health services, education, the voluntary sector and other adult learning and training services. The inspectors also met with parents, volunteers and representatives of the advisory board.

The inspectors visited activities both at the centre and across the wide rural community, and senior leaders attended most of the meetings of the inspection team.

The inspectors observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation including its self-evaluation form, the service action plan, a sample of case studies and files, parental satisfaction surveys, safeguarding policies and procedures and a variety of assessment files for the range of activities delivered.

Inspection team

Catherine Stormonth, Lead inspector	Additional inspector
Karen Cooper	Additional inspector
Anthony Mundy	Additional inspector

Full report

Information about the centre

Flitwick Children's centre was designated in 2007 and achieved full core offer status by 2009. The centre operates from a small purpose-built building adjacent to Templefield Lower School (URN 412432) and the Windmill Pre-School (URN EY367651) both of which are subject to separate inspection arrangements. The reports can be found on the Ofsted website. There have been substantial changes to the way that services are delivered by children's centres in the local authority including the amalgamation of several smaller centres to form the central Flitwick Children's Centre. The reach covers a wide rural area of Central Bedfordshire and includes a large number of villages, from Cranfield and Woburn in the west to Clophill, Silsoe and Barton in the east.

The centre is managed by Action for Children commissioned by the local authority. The centre is governed by an advisory board of key partners. The headteacher of Templefield Lower School is the chair of the advisory board. The centre meets the core purpose by providing early education, and health services, family support and adult learning courses. Most children enter early education with skills that are in line with those expected for their age. There is an acting service co-ordinator who is covering a maternity leave and three out of the other five staff members are new.

The centre's reach area includes 3149 children under five years of age, the majority of whom are White British. The largest minority ethnic groups are from Eastern Europe and there are smaller numbers of Black African and Asian families. The area is very mixed socially and economically with some pockets of deprivation. For example, four of the 35 lower super output areas are amongst the 60% most deprived in England and East Flitwick in particular is in the 20–30% band. Data shows that 6.0% of children live in workless households, 5.1% are lone parents and there is a high number of low income families. Key target groups include children in most need, those living in poverty and victims of domestic abuse, expectant teenagers and teenage mothers and fathers.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

- Improve the engagement of identified priority groups; lone parents, fathers, older expectant mothers, some minority ethnic groups and low income families.
- Improve adult learning and training further by:
 - identifying what parents need to do to meet their family and job aspirations
 - increasing opportunities to gain qualifications in both vocational and academic fields
 - increasing participation in adult learning and the take-up of employment.
- Improve the impact of leadership and management on outcomes for local families by:
 - ensuring that the local authority and Action for Children provide appropriate resources that are deployed effectively to serve the needs of the whole reach area
 - making sure that staff who carry out self-evaluation processes are trained to do this and use this information to inform and define the centre's priorities to drive service improvement
 - working with the local authority to produce clear, realistic development plans with precise targets which set out how the centre will increase its engagement with the people it has defined as most in need.
- Improve the governance of the centre by:
 - liaising with the local authority to provide support and training for members of the advisory board so that they are able to form an accurate, independent view of the performance of the centre and are able to hold the centre to account to meet the core purpose fully and oversee improvements
 - ensuring that advisory board members are committed to their role and attend meetings regularly
 - making sure that parents are represented on the advisory board and their voice is heard to help shape services.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Requires improvement

- The centre has made much recent progress in working in the most deprived East Flitwick area and has been able to significantly increase engagement levels to three quarters of these families. The Teenage Parent Support Pathway has also been a recent successful way of helping and supporting both expectant and teenage mothers, where nearly all attend programmes. There are still, however, too many families in target groups such as lone parents, fathers, older expectant mothers, some minority ethnic groups and low income families that are not accessing the services.
- There was much uncertainty about the accuracy of statistics provided by the local authority. These mostly referred to registrations and the need to increase registrations further rather than the more important data about participation rates of families in attending programmes matched to need.
- The small size of the main centre building in Flitwick imposes some limitations on the capacity to deliver enough sessions there. The centre has been inventive in making good use of community halls and meeting rooms both in Flitwick and the many villages and small towns in the reach area. These arrangements have improved access to services to families who often live in isolated villages with limited public transport. Taxi tokens help some families use services more effectively.
- Good information is provided for families in relation to free early education entitlement for disadvantaged two-year-olds and the take up is high. Any developmental issues are identified at the two-year health review and assessment stage and referrals are made for any early intervention required. Parents are very pleased about the speech and language support for addressing early communication difficulties.

- There are good levels of attendance at the baby clinics and services which are highly valued by mothers. Health visitors persuade mothers to go to the 'Bump Start' and 'Baby Massage' sessions and these are very popular. One said that these were her 'best times of her week' and another said that she was not sure how she would cope without these support and friendship groups.

The quality of practice and services

Requires improvement

- Although there has been some recent improvement in the number of families using services, it is too early in many cases to gauge any real impact yet. Outcomes from some services and extended programmes take much longer to measure the impact on improving the quality of family life.
- The services and activities offered are of good quality but there is simply not enough of them to satisfy needs locally. This restricts the impact of the centre's work in reducing inequalities and improving life chances.
- The development of adult learning, education and skills is rightly seen as a priority but it is still very much at the early planning stage. There is some limited signposting to colleges and training centres but the numbers are low and the colleges are not located in the reach area.
- Families who take advantage of the high quality breastfeeding help and support they receive in the maternity wing of Bedford Hospital, followed up by the Baby Brasserie and Bump Start sessions, were full of praise for the centre. Mothers confirmed that the positive encouragement they received helped them sustain and often extend their breastfeeding. As a result, breastfeeding levels are good and higher than local and national levels.
- Attention to other health issues, like addressing local obesity, is focused where the obesity rates are highest. Families are enjoying the healthy cooking courses and the family gym sessions which are successfully raising their awareness of the importance of a healthy lifestyle.
- The small number of children who attend services are helped to get a good start in their early education and getting ready for moving on to pre-school settings. The Early Years Foundation Stage Profile results for the reach area show an improving picture to levels above those seen nationally and a significant narrowing of the achievement gap between the lowest attaining fifth of children and the rest.
- The work of the Early Intervention Team has had a positive impact on the social care and family outreach aspects, reducing the numbers of children who are at risk from harm. Opportunities are taken to promote safety at home, improved parenting through the high quality 'Parent Puzzle,' the local effective 'TripleP Programme' and the excellent 'Freedom Programme' which caters for those families where domestic abuse is an issue. The long-term benefits of these programmes are impressive, as confirmed by parents' testimonies and case studies.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

Inadequate

- Centre leaders have made a determined effort to engage families in the most deprived parts of Flitwick and have made some progress. Despite these recent good efforts, leadership, governance and management are inadequate because too few families from the centre's identified target groups are using and benefiting from services. There is little strategic direction, for example, in how best to use the limited staff resources and equipment in such a wide reach area for so many families with children under five years old.
- The day-to-day management of the centre by the acting centre co-ordinator is good and new staff have settled quickly into the well-organised routines of using vans to move equipment around the variety of outreach centres. Staff work hard, often in difficult circumstances, loading and unloading resources to run their timetabled activities. It is too early to show the impact of new initiatives and there is much planning in the pipeline for improving services further. This includes support for improving employability with local groups including Jobcentre Plus.
- Action for Children and the local authority are not providing enough support for self-evaluation or

guidance on the use of data. Both of these aspects are weak and do not inform development planning sufficiently. The local authority quarterly data reports do not present a full picture of the performance of target groups and the key targets for improvement are unhelpful and inaccurate.

- Advisory board meetings are poorly attended and some key partners were not officially asked to be members. This contributes to the lack of commitment, lack of training and the overall lack of challenge provided for improving the centre. Parents are not currently represented on the advisory board but their views are collected informally and channelled through a brand new parents' forum.
- Safeguarding policies, procedures and practice are good in relation to safe staff recruitment and use of some excellent volunteers and the thorough health and safety arrangements. Those families who are on Early Help Assessment plans, have children in need or are on the child protection register are supported effectively. The risk of harm to children is significantly reduced in most cases. The support plans for looked after children are also good and children are happy and thriving. The centre provides a vibrant, warm and friendly place and parents feel able to seek help and confide in staff. Staff work with partners and the early intervention team effectively to help families in most need especially in times of crisis.

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

Unique reference number	21185
Local authority	Central Bedfordshire
Inspection number	427462
Managed by	Action for Children on behalf of the local authority

Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	3149
Centre leader	Claire Roberts
Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
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