

# Woodlands Children's Centre

Long Street, Hanslope, Milton Keynes, MK19 7BL

**Inspection date** 10–11 December 2013

<b>Overall effectiveness</b>	<b>This inspection:</b>	<b>Requires improvement</b>	<b>3</b>
	Previous inspection:		
		Inadequate	4
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:

- Governance is not fully effective due to discontinuity in the membership of the advisory board and lack of rigour in the local authority's monitoring.
- Not enough families from some priority groups, such as lone parents, are accessing services regularly.
- Parents' involvement in decision making is underdeveloped, and there is currently no forum.
- The centre's work to establish volunteering, flagged by the last inspection, has been too slow.
- Only a small percentage of workless families take up opportunities to enhance their employability. The absence of any links with Jobcentre Plus impedes the centre's ability to assess this small, but significant group's needs more precisely, and support their economic well-being.

### This centre has the following strengths:

- The two coordinators are driving forward positive change at a good pace. Self-evaluation is realistic and the current action plan is well focused on improvement priorities, including specific and measurable targets.
- Very effective work has taken place to register families living in the area and the proportion using the centre has nearly doubled, with an increase of 20% seen over the last four months.
- The centre has worked effectively to raise its profile through a range of community events and links with social networks. Families using the centre hold it in high regard and are very satisfied with the quality of services they receive.
- Partnerships with health professionals, early years settings and the police have all strengthened considerably since the last inspection, and assist the centre's good work to reduce the risk of harm to an increasing number of vulnerable children and families who are referred.
- The new staff team says how much better things have been in recent months; the team feels valued, well supported and is keen to play a full role in further improving the centre's effectiveness.

## 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.

The inspections were carried out by two Additional Inspectors.

The inspectors held meetings with the centre coordinators, staff, officers from the local authority, partners, members of the advisory board, carers and parents. Several activities were observed by the inspectors, including some jointly with the coordinators who also attended all team meetings.

Inspectors looked at the centre's self-evaluation, action and development plans, a sample of case studies, safeguarding policies and procedures and a range of other documentation.

## Inspection team

Christine Field	Additional Inspector, Lead Inspector
Graham Saltmarsh	Additional Inspector

## Full report

### Information about the centre

Woodlands was designated in 2007 as a phase two stand-alone children's centre. It was previously inspected in October 2012 when it was found to be inadequate. Since then there have been a number of staff changes, including the appointment of two coordinators, four months ago, who share the leadership of a very small team comprising a full-time family support worker, part-time early years teacher and part-time administrator. Three agency staff have worked in the centre for some time on a part-time basis. One agency staff member has recently been made permanent until March 2014 and will work four days a week in response to the increasing number of family support referrals.

The centre's reach area is North Milton Keynes consisting of 23 villages. The two main sites are Hanslope village and the market town of Olney, where its office is located. Following the last inspection a consultation took place to find out why families were not using the centre's services and what services were required. Rural isolation was raised as a major factor in restricting the access of some families. Services are currently delivered at Castlethorpe Village Hall, Hanslope Primary School, Haversham Community Centre, Lavendon Primary School, Olney Youth Centre and Olney Pre-school.

There are 1,032 children under five years of age living in the reach area. Most families (98%) are from White British backgrounds. The area is relatively affluent with social and economic disadvantage found in small pockets across this very rural area, but is centred around Hanslope and Olney where the centre's main sites are located. Approximately 7% of children live in workless homes and 21% are eligible for the childcare element of Working Tax Credit. Very few children are assessed as living in poverty compared to the rest of Milton Keynes. Children's attainment on entry into early education is at the level expected for their age.

Priority groups included vulnerable families, lone parents, workless families, minority ethnic families and fathers.

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

- Establish good governance by
  - sharpening the local authority's focus when monitoring the centre's performance and ensure that recorded evaluations show what impact centre actions are having on meeting agreed targets
  - appointing a chairperson of the advisory board
  - reviewing the advisory board's terms of reference, including its membership
  - providing appropriate training for new parents and partners to support the development of their responsibilities, support and challenge roles.
- Increase the access of priority groups, particularly lone parents, so that at least the large majority use appropriate services.
- Set up a parents' forum and move swiftly to appoint more parents to the advisory board.
- Support those parents who have shown an interest in volunteering to take up the opportunity.
- Increase the take up of employment-related skills training, particularly by those who are workless, and develop the emerging link with Jobcentre Plus to assess needs and support families' economic well-being.

## Inspection judgements

### Access to services by young children and families

Requires improvement

- Due to staffing problems, the centre's work in finding out why some families were not engaging in its services got off to a slower than expected start. Marketing has moved up a gear in recent

months and the effectiveness of the approaches being taken by the relatively new coordinators are reflected positively in the rapidly rising number of registrations, including from minority ethnic families and fathers.

- A majority of families use centre services regularly, with an increasing number from priority groups accessing what is on offer. The strong focus on targeting support to those who need it most has not only assisted families in times of great need but also nurtured their participation in the widening range of well-located universal services. Nevertheless, at 35%, too few lone parents are being reached.
- Levels of employment and adult qualifications are very high in the area and relatively few families are workless. The data show that 70% of this small, but significant, group are in regular contact with the centre. However, very few workless parents access specific services to enhance their employability, and the centre has not yet looked closely enough at why this is.
- The developing partnership with health services means that the centre now knows about, and follows up, all new births in the area. Staff attend baby clinics and work in purposeful partnership to meet the needs of expectant mothers, young parents and those who experience multiple births.
- Most eligible two-year-old children take up their entitlement to early education, as do three- and four-year-olds. Good links with speech and language therapists, including their attendance at 'Let's talk and play' sessions, effectively support the development of those children who are experiencing language delay.
- The wide range of well attended summer holiday events successfully raised the profile of the centre as a focal point for community activities. The centre's participation in local activities, such as the Olney Street Party and current 'Dickens of a Christmas' festival, ensures that families not yet using services are getting to know what the centre can offer them. Monitoring shows that social networking is being used more and more by families to keep in touch.

### The quality of practice and services

Requires improvement

- Services are now being carefully planned to meet priority needs and practice is moving forward as the staff team takes on board new roles to ensure experience and expertise are used to best effect. New sessions, such as 'Bumps and Beyond', attended by staff and breastfeeding councillors, are clearly focused on helping new parents to build confident parenting skills. Coordinators rightly recognise that the centre's work to enhance families' economic well-being is not good enough.
- A small number of families have been signposted to adult learning courses and a few have been supported in setting up their own business through the link with MKDons 'Kick into business' course which runs every six months. However, despite the large majority of workless families using the centre, the take up of opportunities to enhance their employability is low. A strategic partnership with Jobcentre Plus has recently been arranged by the local authority; this offers the scope for the centre to better support specific families.
- At the time of the last inspection there were no volunteers and this is still the case. Nine parents attended a meeting last month organised by the coordinators and expressed an interest in giving their time, but the centre has yet to formalise this.
- The strong link with health visitors has resulted in services being provided, such as the 'Postnatal drop -in' which is well attended and enables families to access expert advice, for example about weaning. Staff attend baby clinics and work cooperatively to support the well-being of first time parents, including those who are finding having a new baby particularly stressful.
- 'Stay and Play' and 'Toddler Time' sessions are very popular and contribute well to children's learning. The growing partnership with early years settings is supporting the centre's focus on school readiness. A new progress tracking system has yet to be embedded, but has good potential for helping staff to keep a close eye on the development of priority children. At 65%, the proportion of five-year-olds who achieve a good level of development is well above the local authority and national average.
- Adults attending the centre develop a good understanding of their responsibilities for their children's well-being. The House Guide reminds everyone about safeguarding matters, such as not using mobile phones during sessions and only having hot drinks in the kitchen area. 'Hints for a healthy

family' leaflets provide useful reminders about the importance of diet and physical exercise. The level of obesity in young children is below that seen nationally.

- Family support work is an increasing area of practice and the number of referrals made in recent months has risen significantly. Extra staffing has been taken on to ensure families' needs are met in a timely manner. Effective cooperation between a range of agencies means children and families receive the coordinated early help they need.
- Case files are well maintained and carefully chart families' journeys. The developing use of evaluative tools, such as the Family Star, demonstrates the positive impact staff interventions have on empowering families to take control, overcome the challenges they face and improve life chances.
- Families using the centre hold it in high regard and are very satisfied with the quality of services they receive. Comments such as 'the centre welcomes everyone, envelopes families and makes them feel part of everything' are typical.

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

Requires improvement

- Staffing changes impeded the centre's development for a period of six months following the last inspection. Local authority support was clearly effective in managing the situation and appointing new leadership. The two coordinators are working together successfully and their actions over the last four months already show a demonstrable impact on improving the centre's performance.
- The local authority's past monitoring has been frequent and detailed, but the records of the impact of the actions being taken are not sufficiently precise. For example, in July, evaluations show that the advisory board was functioning well. However, the board's minutes for July raise concerns about its terms of reference and falling membership.
- The advisory board has been well established in the past, but it is not fully effective at present. A range of partners are on board and a chair from a neighbouring centre is in place to support a number of parents who have indicated they want to get involved, including one as chair. Training has been identified to ensure that everyone understands their support and challenge role in going forward.
- Parents make their views known about services through regular consultations and the completion of post-activity evaluations. However, there is currently no specific forum that informs the centre's strategic decision making.
- Safeguarding is given high profile in policy and procedures. Partnerships with health professionals, social care and the police assist the centre's effective work to reduce the risk of harm to vulnerable children and families. Staff vetting procedures are robust and training in child protection matters is up-to-date.
- The coordinators' evaluation of the centre's strengths and weaknesses is accurate and the recently devised development plan has clear timelines, sensibly allocated resources and precise targets to assist a brisk pace of measurable improvement. Morale is high and the staff say how much better things have been in recent months. Their supervision and appraisal are back on track, they now meet regularly as a team to share experiences and are keen to help move the centre forward.

**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>	23657
<b>Local authority</b>	Milton Keynes
<b>Inspection number</b>	427444
<b>Managed by</b>	The local authority
<b>Approximate number of children under five in the reach area</b>	1,032
<b>Centre leader</b>	Kristianne Gray and Emma Stace
<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	October 2012
<b>Telephone number</b>	01234 241837
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