

Houghton Regis Children's Centre

Main Base Tithe Farm Neighbourhood Centre, c/o Tithe Farm Lower School Site, Houghton Regis, LU5 5JB

Inspection date	15–16 January 2014		
Overall effectiveness	This inspection: Previous inspection:	Requires improvement	3
		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:

- Not enough children and parents, particularly lone parents, children with disabilities, fathers and those in the most deprived areas, are actively engaged in the centre's services.
- The centre's managers do not have sufficient information about the families in the area to give them a clear understanding of their needs. As a result, the centre does not always deploy its services and resources in the most effective way to meet families' needs.
- The centre does not do enough to prepare children for school or to help parents support their children's learning at home. As a result, children's skills are well below the levels expected by the time they start school.
- The leadership, governance and management of the centre are not sufficiently robust. Quality assurance systems and data are not consistently accurate which hinders the effectiveness of the centre's development plan.
- Parents are not sufficiently involved in decision-making and contributing to the future development of the centre's services.

This centre has the following strengths:

- The centre provides good levels of care, guidance and support to those families who use the centre's services. Intensive support packages provided by experienced and well-trained family workers ensure that help is on hand when families need it most.
- A wide range of professional partners, with different backgrounds and expertise, work well together to keep children safe from harm.
- The centre provides good practical advice and guidance to families on topics such as housing, finances, drug and alcohol misuse, and health relationships.
- The centre is welcoming and well organised. Its resources are of a good quality and leaders and managers are highly committed to improving the centre.

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 children’s centre manager, the programme manager and the area manager. They also held meetings with centre staff, parents, members of the advisory board and a number of partners including health, education and children’s social care professionals.

The inspectors visited a number of sessions held during the inspection, including ‘Bumps and Baby Group’, ‘Active Morning’ and ‘Terrific Twos’. They also involved the children’s centre manager, programme manager and area manager in all team meetings.

They observed the centre’s work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation, including the centre’s self-evaluation and development plans, parents’ evaluations, key policies and the centre’s equality and safeguarding procedures.

Inspection team

Tara Street, Lead inspector	Additional inspector
Christine Blowman	Additional inspector
Peter Towner	Additional inspector

Full report

Information about the centre

Houghton Regis Children's Centre is a phase one centre which is an amalgamation of Tithe Farm Children's Centre and Parkside Children's Centre. It offers a range of services which include child health services, family play sessions, parenting programmes, adult education, family outreach services and crèche facilities.

There are approximately 1,346 children aged nought to five years in the reach area, of which 43% live in areas identified as among the 30% most deprived areas in the country. Within the area, there are significant issues to do with mental health, teenage pregnancy, isolation, unemployment, domestic violence and low levels of literacy and numeracy. There is a diverse mix of residents and a rising minority ethnic community at 12.9%, many of whom speak English as an additional language. Most families live in social housing or private rented accommodation; there are some small areas of affluence and privately owned housing. Levels of unemployment are high, with 31.9% of children living in households dependent upon workless benefits, and many of the existing jobs are low paid.

Most children enter early years provision with knowledge and skills that are well below expectations for their age, particularly in communication, language, and personal, social and emotional development. There are links to the six local primary schools; these are subject to separate inspection arrangements and the reports are available on our website: www.ofsted.gov.uk.

Governance of the centre is provided by The Children's Society on behalf of the local authority, in conjunction with an advisory board that includes representatives from the centre's partners and members of the local community.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

- Improve access to services by:
 - increasing the number of children and adults who use the centre's services regularly, including those from the most deprived areas, lone parents, children with disabilities and fathers
 - using data more effectively to monitor engagement levels across the reach area and to identify families and particular target groups who do not yet use the centre's services.
- Improve the way the centre helps children to be ready to start school and increase the proportion of children who join local schools with the skills expected for their age by:
 - working with local schools and childcare providers to develop and improve the activities which prepare children for school
 - helping parents to understand and support their children's learning and development at home.
- Improve the effectiveness of leadership, governance and management by:
 - improving the collation and analysis of data so that leaders and managers have an accurate understanding of the needs of the community
 - improving the centre's development plan and quality assurance systems, so that all key priorities are precise, have measurable success criteria and contain well-informed targets
 - involving parents more in strategic decision making by making sure that they are represented on the centre's advisory board.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Requires improvement

- The close partnership with health visitors and the regular attendance of an outreach officer at ante- and postnatal clinics has increased the number of families registering with the centre and raised their awareness of the centre's services. Most families are now registered, but the large majority of families, including those identified as most in need of support, are not yet actively engaged in the centre's services.
- Not enough families are currently benefiting from the services provided by the centre. There is limited use of data to monitor the engagement of families who most need the centre's help, including lone parents, children with disabilities, fathers and those in the most deprived areas. As a result, the centre does not always deploy its services and resources in the most effective way to meet families' needs.
- Staff have an appropriate presence in the community and have visited some areas where families are reluctant to engage in order to promote the services available. However, these initiatives are not effective in increasing the engagement of some hard-to-reach families and thereby helping to reduce any inequalities.
- The managers and staff know the families who do access the centre's services well. Staff ensure that these families are able to access the care, guidance and support they need. For example, those parents working with family support staff receive prioritised access to relevant activities that deal with issues such as teenage pregnancy, isolation and domestic violence.
- Centre staff work closely with providers in the private sector to ensure that parents are fully informed about free early years education in the neighbourhood. As a result, the proportion of children from eligible families who take up the entitlement to free early education at age two, has increased in the last year from 52% to 71%. In addition, the uptake of funded nursery places for three- and four-year olds is very high at 100%.
- Staff keep in contact with families who already access services through their attendance at centre-based activities and a monthly newsletter. Families particularly enjoy one-off events such as the recent 'Pamper Day' and 'Bling Your Buggy' walk.

The quality of practice and services

Requires improvement

- Although the centre provides a good range of activities and resources for those who attend, the low number of families from some target groups engaging with the centre reduces its overall impact on improving outcomes for children and on reducing inequalities and improving life chances.
- The centre does not do enough to increase the engagement of families and children. Staff do not support enough parents sufficiently well to help them to gain a good understanding of their children's development and how they can support their learning at home.
- The centre has close relationships with some local schools and early years settings, but the range of sessions to help prepare children for school is too narrow and children start school with skills which are well below those expected for their age.
- A successful drive to promote healthy eating and active lifestyles has resulted in the proportion of five-year-olds who are obese being in line with the national average at 8.7%. There is a high take-

up of the immunisation programme at 92.5%. Levels of sustained breastfeeding have increased quickly from 16.7% in 2011 to a current figure of 45.1%, which is now just below the national average.

- Parenting classes are having a positive impact on some parents' ability to manage their children's behaviour. One parent stated, 'The course has helped me to become a better mum.' The 'Great Expectations Group' that is provided by Homestart is also helping to improve parents' mental health and general well-being.
- Good use is made of the Common Assessment Framework to ensure the right mix of professional support for the most vulnerable families. The successful use of a 'family star' shows the progress being made in assessing families' needs and agreeing improvement targets. The good support from family support workers, in partnership with a wide range of professionals with different expertise, is helping some families to move out of crisis situations and to keep children safe. For example, the centre provides good practical advice and guidance to families on topics such as housing, finances, drug and alcohol misuse, and health relationships.
- Adults, including those from workless homes, benefit from an appropriate range of services that enhance their education and employment opportunities and raise their levels of self-esteem and confidence. Parents are actively encouraged to become volunteers and they experience a robust programme of training and support which has led to some gaining employment or helping to run various activities alongside centre staff.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

Requires improvement

- Leadership, governance and management of the centre require improvement. The lack of rigour in analysing the available data and in checking the impact of quality assurance procedures, leads to misconceptions about the centre's on-going performance. For example, data are not used effectively to monitor, track and analyse the engagement of key priority groups. Consequently, and despite performance monitoring and well-structured annual visits by the Local Authority, the centre's self-evaluation is not accurate.
- The development plan lacks rigour. Performance targets and success measures are not used well enough to enable staff, the local authority and the advisory board to effectively monitor the impact of the centre's services.
- The advisory board does not have a clear enough understanding of the centre's performance because of a lack of accurate data and information about the centre's effectiveness. This prevents the board from effectively challenging the centre in order to secure further improvements.
- Parents are not represented on the advisory board and, as a result, their contribution to shaping the future direction of the centre is too limited.
- The centre is welcoming and well organised and its resources are of a good quality . Financial management and deployment of staffing and resources are sound. Partner agencies are highly supportive of the work of the centre and parents who attend sessions, regularly share their views.The centre manager is experienced, highly motivated and well qualified for her role. Staff are carefully supported and supervised at all levels. A typical comment from staff about the manager is, 'She is incredibly supportive and passionate about moving the centre on to become outstanding and, as a result, we share this vision.'
- Safeguarding policies and procedures are robust, and statutory requirements are met effectively.

Family support workers, in particular, receive good levels of training and professional support, ensuring they understand how best to assess and meet the needs of the families with whom they work. In addition, close supervision alongside regular case file management helps to identify weaknesses in recordings, ensures that family files are kept up to date and progress for families is routinely reviewed.

- The centre makes effective use of the Common Assessment Framework to safeguard children subject to a child protection plan, looked after children or those who are identified as in most need. Parents demonstrate a good understanding of the centre's safeguarding responsibilities and duty to protect all children because child protection policies and procedures are clearly explained to them.

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	23325
Local authority	Central Bedfordshire
Inspection number	430186
Managed by	The Children's Society on behalf of the local authority

Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	1346
Centre leader	Lynsey Glover
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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