

The Robins Children's Centre

c/o Heelands School, Glovers Lane, Heelands, Milton Keynes, MK13 7QL

Inspection dates	7–8 May 2014
Previous inspection date	Not previously inspected

Overall effectiveness	This inspection: Previous inspection:	Requires improvement	3
		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		Requires improvement	3

Summary of key findings for children and families

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

- Though the numbers are increasing over time, not enough priority families are using centre services.
- Only a minority of eligible two-year-olds are taking up their free education place. The recognised shortage of good-quality places means that some children may not get their entitlement locally.
- The range of services available to support out-of-work families is too narrow, and there is a lack of focus in checking up on how well they do when they access partners' courses.
- Case files on families' one-to-one support are not all maintained to a good standard, and sometimes the actions taken are not followed up sufficiently thoroughly to check for impact.
- Some improvement targets lack precision and their dates for completion are too far away to bring about the rapid changes needed.
- The lack of administrative support is a barrier to keeping on top of the paperwork.

The children's centre has the following strengths:

- Managers have an accurate and realistic view of the centre's strengths and weaknesses, and have set out clear priorities for improvement.
- Governance is well established; both the advisory board and the local authority keep close checks on the centre's performance.
- A veritable 'army' of volunteers is being nurtured to support the experienced and dedicated staff in delivering services that are being increasingly well matched to local needs.
- Strong partnerships underpin the centre's effective work to improve health outcomes, help children get ready for school and reduce the risk of harm to the most vulnerable children.
- Highly effective support is given to parents who are learning to speak English as an additional language, and to families who are facing personal challenges in their lives.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

- Increase the engagement of families who are out of work, and minority ethnic children and families, so that at least the large majority (65%) regularly access services.
- Work with the local authority to increase the take-up of free two-year-old places so that all eligible children, and particularly those most in need, benefit from good-quality early education.
- With partners, find out more about the needs of families who are out of work and ensure that appropriate services that enhance their education, skills and life chances are available, and that outcomes are carefully checked.
- Make sure that all family case files demonstrate best practice in recording, and that actions are fully evaluated for impact.
- With the local authority, sort out administrative support as quickly as possible and pick up the pace of positive change by making sure that improvement targets are precise and measurable and are met in realistic deadlines.

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 managers, local authority officers, partners, parents, volunteers, centre users and members of the advisory board.

The inspectors visited Two Mile Ash Toddler group and carried out a joint observation with senior managers. They also observed Little Robins Toddler group and five other centre-based activities.

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

Inspection team

Christine Field, Lead inspector

Additional inspector

Jameel Hassan

Additional inspector

Full report

Information about the centre

The Robins Children's Centre is a phase two stand-alone centre that was designated in 2008 and first opened its doors to families in January 2009. The centre aims to meet its core purpose by delivering services from its base at Heelands and at Holmwood School, Priory Common School, The Annex Two Mile Ash, and Church of the Holy Cross.

There are 946 children under four years of age living in the area served by the centre, which comprises Bradwell, Great Holm, Heelands and Two Mile Ash and is mixed economically and socially. Nearly 20% of children are living in homes where no one is in work, and one in five families take up the childcare element of Working Tax Credit. The large majority of families are White British; others are from different minority ethnic groups, including Polish, Romanian, African and Asian. Children typically start in early education provision with skills and abilities below the level expected for their age.

The centre is co-located with Heelands School (URN: 110382), which is inspected under separate arrangements and is managed directly by the local authority. An advisory board comprising partner representatives and parents is in place. The small staff team are providing cover for absence, including administrative support which has been very limited for some time.

The local authority's public consultation about changing the structure of children's centres is due to be completed shortly. The local authority has also been undertaking job evaluations about which staff are still waiting to hear the outcome.

The centre defines its priority groups as children and families living in workless or low income homes, including two year-old children eligible for free education and children and families from minority ethnic backgrounds.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Requires improvement

- Registrations stand at 63% and are rising, but the children and families, especially those from priority groups, who use the centre's services are not yet the large majority.
- Most three- and four-year-olds access free education but a much lower proportion of two-year-olds than seen nationally (45%) take up their entitlement. The centre works effectively with partners to enhance the quality of early years provision; however, there is a significant shortfall in the number of places available to meet current and future demand for two-year-olds. The centre is, therefore, a long way off meeting the local authority's target of 98% take-up.
- The strong partnership with health, and good communication, result in the centre's timely contact with expectant mothers and new parents, and all teenage parents now access centre services. Staff visits to clinics in the community and those held at the centre are helping to increase the number of priority children and families, particularly those from minority ethnic families, who access services.
- A high number of individual families, all from priority groups, are referred to the centre for one-to-one help because of their circumstances which make them particularly vulnerable; and they engage well with family support services.
- The centre's marketing strategy is clearly focused on extending its reach to priority groups and engaging with those who might be reluctant to do so. The use of social media and the support of 22 partners who circulate centre details far and wide are positive features in the work to secure improvement. Staff have taken on additional work but the lack of administrative support is having a negative impact on getting everything done quickly.

The quality of practice and services

Requires improvement

- The centre is working effectively to take services into the community but has yet to ensure that the large majority of children and families from priority groups use them regularly so as to improve their well-being and life chances.
- A range of services are available that provide an appropriate balance between those open to everyone and those needing targeted support. Work remains to ensure that a higher proportion of priority families attend the sessions open to everyone, by prioritising places, especially the most popular.
- Some 55% of workless families are in contact with the centre, but most are not sufficiently engaged in activities to help them get back to work. There are instances where some effective work has taken place to support a few parents back into work, not least through the volunteering route, but the progress made by those who are signposted to education and skills training is not being systematically checked.
- Family support workers are highly valued for the work they do with families, some of whom have extremely complex problems and at times require the expert help of social care. Some but not all case files provide clear details of the positive impact of partnership work in helping families get back on track, but the quality of record keeping at times requires improvement. Staff say that time available to get administration done is simply not enough, but usefully they are booked onto training to support case file report writing as a priority.
- Parents benefit from their involvement with the 'Nurturing programme' and confirm that their confidence and parenting skills increase because of what they learn.
- Staff are very positive role models in sessions and this rubs off on participants. Parents were observed to interact exceptionally well with their children as they enjoyed playing outside in the rain with water guns, or indoors as they used coloured markers to make repeating patterns, and 'do writing'. A useful start has very recently been made that involves parents in working with staff to chart their children's progress in 'Learning Journeys' but it is too early to know how effective this will be as a tracking tool.
- Data show that a much higher proportion of children who have accessed children's centre services achieve a good level of development compared with that seen locally or nationally, and this demonstrates the value the centre adds to reducing inequalities and ensuring children's readiness for school.
- Parents learning to speak English as an additional language are well supported by services run from the centre. The ten-week 'English as a Second Other Language' class run in partnership with Adult and Community Education is currently being extended for a further five weeks by popular demand.
- Strong partnerships with health professionals are helping to reduce childhood obesity, which is now below the national level. The centre has worked in collaboration with the Probation Service to develop a forest school, sensory garden and vegetable patch at the centre. This super resource has been developed with input from families, staff from a local bank, volunteers and advisory board members.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

Requires improvement

- Managers have an accurate view of what the centre does well and which aspects need more work, and this is well reflected in the self-evaluation form. Priorities to improve the centre effectiveness are set out in the very detailed service delivery plan, but not all targets are sufficiently precise or measurable, and this limits the plan's usefulness for driving change positively and quickly.
- The centre runs smoothly on a day-to-day basis but the lack of administrative support has been an ongoing challenge. Between them, staff have come up with 'work arounds', but some things, like making sure family information is captured onto the data management system quickly, have slipped and the 'apple pie order' seen in documentation previously has not been maintained.
- Governance is well established. The advisory board involves a good range of partners and parents, in providing both support and challenge in its decision making. Regular monitoring takes place by the local authority which has a realistic view about the centre's performance and recognises the uncertainties being faced during the period of consultation and staffing reviews.

- Staff feel valued in role, and are upbeat and focused on their work with children and families; they show high-level commitment to giving of their best. Supervision is undertaken regularly, is supportive, and links well to appraisal and professional development training. Clinical supervision is bought in to help staff when they are involved with very complex family problems.
- Safeguarding matters are taken seriously and all legal obligations are met. Good work with partners is central to ensuring that any risk of harm to children and families, including children subject to a child protection plan, assessed as in need or looked after, is reduced. Staff work closely with social care and other partners to give full support through the use of the Common Assessment Framework and Team Around the Family procedures.
- Parents' views are regularly sought after sessions and courses, and have led to changes such as the start and finish time. A large number of parents who are also volunteers add value to the resources available to the centre, which are quite tight but used effectively to help improve the centre's impact in meeting local needs.

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.

Centre details

Unique reference number	23250
Local authority	Milton Keynes
Inspection number	442865
Managed by	The local authority
Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	946
Centre leader	Amanda Batty
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