

B2 The Ark Children's Centre

St Catherine's Hoddesdon VC CE Primary, Haslewood Avenue, Hoddesdon, EN11 8HT

Inspection dates 3–4 June 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:

- As a result of a focused and effective campaign by centre staff most families are now registered. The centre has been particularly effective at registering families living in the most deprived areas. However, only a minority of families from the priority groups identified by the centre regularly access services.
- Too few eligible two-year-old children are being supported to access free early education.
- The centre is not able to fully demonstrate the difference that its services make because procedures to monitor and track attendance and the progress made by children and adults are not sufficiently well developed.
- Adults from workless households are not helped enough to participate in further education and training so that their employability skills are improved. Not enough opportunities are provided for adults to volunteer at the centre.
- A range of service and groups are open to all families as well as others that are provided specifically for target families. These help parents who attend to learn to play with their children and support their learning and development more effectively. However parents' engagement in these groups is variable and so they do not benefit fully from what the centre has to offer.
- Leaders do not use information as well as they could to show the difference that the centre makes and to plan for improvements. Neither do they effectively observe the work of staff to improve the quality of practice.
- Although the centre is improving, these weaknesses mean that the management committee and advisory board cannot hold the centre fully to account for the quality and impact of its services.

It has the following strengths:

- Centre staff work well with a range of professionals and community organisations. These effective partnerships and the centre's outreach work have a positive impact on the families accessing the centre's services.
- Parents speak highly of the support they receive from the centre. They feel welcomed and listened to and value the care and guidance provided by centre staff.

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 the centre manager and staff, community, health and education partners, and parents. They also spoke to representatives of the management committee, advisory board and the local authority.

An inspector visited Westfield Pre-school and St Augustine's Under 5's with the outreach worker. Inspectors observed a 'Baby Group' that included support for breastfeeding, a 'Baby Yoga' session and jointly observed a 'Stay-and-Play session', the 'Inbetweeners Group' and 'Lunch 'N' Meet' session with the centre manager.

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

Inspection team

Alison Cogher	Additional inspector
Aileen King	Additional inspector

Full report

Information about the centre

B2 The Ark Children's Centre is a phase three centre which was designated in March 2010. It provides a range of services to meet the core purpose. The centre works with other centres in the area to provide services and share expertise and resources.

The centre is governed and managed by St Catherine's CofE Primary School which is co-located with the centre. The school is subject to a separate inspection and the report can be found at www.ofsted.gov.uk.

The management committee and advisory board have been restructured over the last year with a number of members new to their roles.

The area that the centre serves is diverse with some areas of deprivation particularly in The Ark and Town, Lampits and Westfield. There are currently approximately 891 children under the age of five living in the area. The large majority of families are White British and approximately one quarter of families is from minority ethnic groups including Italian, Polish and other European backgrounds.

The centre faces a varied range of challenges and issues that reflect the diversity of the reach area. It has identified its target groups as children living in workless households, those on a low income, families from minority ethnic groups, lone parents, and households where there is domestic violence or parents using drugs or alcohol.

Children's skills and knowledge on entry to early years provision are broadly at the level expected for their age.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

- Ensure almost all families are registered and the large majority of target groups sustain contact with the centre. Specifically ensure that:
 - most eligible two-year-olds access free early education
 - the large majority of adults from workless households engage in further education or training that will improve their employability.
- Improve the quality and impact of services by developing procedures that will enable the centre to demonstrate that outcomes for families are improving by:
 - tracking the engagement of families, the services they are accessing and the difference this has made to their lives
 - tracking the progress of children who have been supported by the centre.
- Improve leadership and governance so the centre has a clearer picture of its successes and what needs to be improved further by:
 - making better use of data to check the impact of the centre's activities
 - sharpening the focus for observations of staff so that evaluations are linked closely to how well the expectations for a session or activity have been met
 - providing adults with more opportunities to volunteer and contribute to the running of the centre.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Requires improvement

- Over the last year centre staff have actively promoted the centre and the services it provides. As a result the very large majority of the families, including those expecting children, in the three most deprived areas are now registered, a considerable increase.
- Whilst the centre has a better picture this year of the families who live in the area, they do not systematically monitor the number and type of sessions or activities attended. This makes it difficult for the centre to show the level of engagement of families and target groups and to check what difference their attending groups has made to their lives. As a result data shows that only a minority of families in most need of additional support are currently engaged with the centre.
- Although they are often registered and seen by the outreach worker, the engagement of families living in workless households in programmes to improve their employability remains low.
- The centre works successfully with health and social care professionals to identify families and children who are most in need to make sure they receive prompt support. Children, who are subject to child protection, children in need and those looked after are known to, and supported by the centre. Families experiencing domestic abuse access programmes that make a positive and lasting difference to their lives.
- The centre benefits from a strong working partnership with health visitors. When visiting new mothers or families who have moved into the area, health visitors encourage them to complete a 'consent to contact' card which they pass to the centre. This has increased dramatically the number of families with babies registered with the centre. The Baby Group enables women to access maternity services during their pregnancy and breastfeeding support after the birth of their baby.
- Almost all three-year-old children in the centre's reach have taken up a pre-school place. The centre is less successful in contacting families with two-year-olds eligible to access an early education place. Currently of the two-thirds of families contacted, half have been allocated a two-year-old place.
- The centre successfully engages families of minority ethnic backgrounds. Groups which are open to all families, but have as their focus the integration and support of minority ethnic families into the local community, are valued and appreciated. They include 'Jungle Kids', a toddler group for Polish speaking families, and 'Bizzy Bambinos', a music and song group for Italian speakers. English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) courses are valued by adults who engage with the centre as a way to help them with day-to-day living and into employment.
- The centre provides good direct support or signposts families to organisations and professionals who help them with benefits and financial advice, and guidance on staying safe and healthy living.

The quality of practice and services

Requires improvement

- Parents feel welcome and value and respect the centre. Parents particularly appreciate the effective support, care and guidance they receive from centre staff. Those who have become 'Parent Champions' speak highly of the opportunities they are being given to develop their skills to enable them to carry out their role well.
- A range of activities and services are run from the centre and they are valued by those who attend. However, the purpose of these groups is not always clear so the centre is not able to identify the impact they have had on narrowing inequalities.

- Outreach family support services are planned carefully and developed in consultation with individual families. The progress that these families make is tracked carefully and case files show that this support makes a positive difference to their lives.
- Activities enable parents to mix with others whose children are of similar age. The centre responded positively to parents concerns about mixing toddlers capable of running with mobile, but not yet walking babies. The 'Inbetweeners' group was started to address this concern and is much appreciated by those who attend.
- While groups are running, centre staff provide good levels of support and guidance to individuals but opportunities to share information, for example about how parents can support their child's learning and improve their readiness for school, are not systematically planned for.
- Information about attendance at groups is collected but it is not used to track the level of engagement of different target groups.
- Local authority data indicates an improving trend in Early Years Foundation Stage outcomes with an above average proportion of children reaching a good level of development in 2013. However, a significant gap remains between the lowest achieving children and their peers. The centre does not have enough data from its own groups, pre-schools and schools to enable it to track children's progress and evaluate the impact of their involvement.
- Working with partners including B3 Housing and Hertford Regional College the centre is able to give adults information about adult education and training courses. Courses are often run from the centre and those that support individuals experiencing domestic abuse, or related to parenting and healthy living are popular and well attended. Fewer adults, particularly from workless households, sign up for and attend courses or programmes aimed at improving their chance of being employed. Opportunities for parents to volunteer are limited, although the centre has been successful in recruiting, and has embarked on training, parents as parent champions.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

Requires improvement

- The centre manager understands the centre's strengths and areas for improvement. The local authority has challenged the centre to improve and set appropriate targets in the annual development plan. The centre receives support from a centre improvement partner and is working with other local centre leaders to address the priorities identified for improvement.
- The management committee and advisory board are beginning to receive relevant information about the centre's groups and services to help them to check how well the centre is supporting families. However, data is not always collected or analysed well enough to enable the centre to show how well its services are impacting on families lives. Similarly, monitoring information such as that gathered through observations of sessions is not always detailed enough to allow the progress being made towards addressing priorities to be evaluated.
- The management committee, advisory board and staff are resilient, hard working and committed to delivering an improved service for all the families in the centre's area. The management committee and advisory board have actively sought to improve their capacity to challenge the centre to improve through training and have welcomed the support of the local authority. Parents are represented well and there is a good range of expertise on the advisory board including key partners such as health visitors and community housing.

- Parents are encouraged to give their views at the end of groups and programmes they have attended. The centre responds promptly to any concerns and is willing to modify its services to meet parents' changing needs.
- Arrangements for managing the performance of staff have been reviewed and revised. Targets for improvement are now tightly linked to the centre's development plan so that performance can be measured.
- The centre has very good relationships with its partners and was described by some as 'integral' and 'the hub' for work in the community. They work effectively together to support families' needs and to promote community cohesion.
- Safeguarding policies and procedures are robust and consistently applied. Case files are checked fortnightly and more frequently if required. Cases assessed under the Common Assessment Framework are discussed fully to make sure that children who may be more vulnerable receive early help.

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	20158
Local authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	442857
Managed by	St Catherine's Hoddesdon VC CE Primary School

Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	891
Centre leader	Jo Goldsmith
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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