

# Sandy Children's Centre

Laburnum Lower School, Laburnum Road, Sandy, Bedfordshire, SG19 1HQ

**Inspection dates** 2–3 July 2014

<b>Overall effectiveness</b>	<b>This inspection:</b> Previous inspection:	<b>Good</b>	<b>2</b>
		Not previously inspected	
Access to services by young children and families		<b>Good</b>	<b>2</b>
The quality of practice and services		<b>Good</b>	<b>2</b>
The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management		<b>Good</b>	<b>2</b>

## Summary of key findings for children and families

### This is a good centre

- Most families with children under the age of five living within the centre's reach area are registered with the centre and a large majority of these, including those in priority groups and expectant parents, engage in the centre's activities.
- Good relationships with a wide range of professionals, especially health visitors, keep the centre informed about families who might benefit from the centre's support.
- The centre provides a good range of high-quality services, some of which are open to all, others of which are designed to meet specific needs or to support priority groups.
- The quality of care, guidance and support provided by the staff is excellent; it has a major impact on the lives of some families and helps to reduce inequalities.
- Parents speak very highly of the support they receive from the centre. Some refer to the centre as their 'lifeline'.
- The centre manager provides good leadership and manages the day-to-day arrangements of the centre well. She is supported extremely well by a dedicated team of caring staff.
- Governance arrangements are good; the local authority, the commissioned provider, the centre's advisory board and volunteers all contribute well to the smooth running of the centre.
- The centre has good policies and procedures for keeping children and families safe and for ensuring their well-being.

### It is not outstanding because:

- The centre does not know about every family with young children living in its area; this is partly because the local authority, the health services and some schools do not share some relevant data and information about families to facilitate the centre's work.
- Systems for tracking the progress of individuals and evaluating the long-term impact of the centre's services are not yet well developed.
- Although previous development planning has helped the centre to improve, the centre's self-evaluation and development planning are not analytical or rigorous enough.

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

- Work with the local authority, health trusts and schools to ensure that relevant information about families and children living in the reach area is shared more freely so that the centre can:
  - have a more complete picture of all the families with young children living in the reach area, especially with regard to new births
  - identify and make contact with those families who are not yet registered with the centre, particularly those who might benefit from the centre's support.
  
- Develop better systems for tracking the progress of those who use the centre's services in order to gauge the long-term impact and effectiveness of the centre's services.
  
- Improve the centre's self-evaluation and development planning processes by ensuring that:
  - the centre's self-evaluation analyses more rigorously the impact of its actions on the outcomes for users
  - the centre's development plan outlines more clearly how improvement priorities will be implemented and how their success will be measured.

## 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: representatives from the local authority, Action for Children and the local advisory board; the centre manager and staff of the children's centre; various groups of parents and users of the centre; and representatives of organisations who work in partnership with the centre.

The inspectors visited activities taking place at the children's centre, Sandy Baptist Church, Wrestlingworth Lower School and a local site for Travellers.

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

## Inspection team

Graham Sims, Lead inspector	Additional Inspector
Lorraine Manford	Additional Inspector
Lesley Talbot-Strettle	Additional Inspector

## Full report

### Information about the centre

Sandy Children's Centre is one of nine children's centres which serve Central Bedfordshire. It is a stand-alone centre managed by Action for Children on behalf of the local authority. Governance of the centre is shared between the local authority, Action for Children and the centre's advisory board. Day-to-day management is the responsibility of the centre manager, who took up post in 2012 and who oversees a relatively small team of four staff.

The centre opened in 2009. The centre's facilities, which comprise a general-purpose meeting room and two small offices, are located on the site of Laburnum Lower School. The school is subject to a separate inspection and the report can be accessed on Ofsted's website at [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk).

The centre works with a wide range of partner organisations to offer a variety of activities and courses for parents and young children. It also refers them to other specialist providers. The centre commissions a nearby pre-school to provide crèche facilities for some of its activities, but does not provide other day care for young children. The centre runs some of its activities at community facilities scattered throughout its reach area.

The centre's reach area is extensive. It is centred on the town of Sandy, but covers many outlying villages. An estimated 1394 children under the age of five live in the area. Most families are White British. Just under 10% come from minority ethnic backgrounds; this includes some families from Traveller communities. The area is one of relative affluence, but there are pockets of deprivation near to the centre where levels of unemployment and the proportion of families dependent on benefits are above those for the surrounding area. Children's skills, knowledge and abilities on entry to early years provision are in line with those expected for their age.

The centre has identified its key priority groups as: children living in the most deprived part of the reach area; children from minority ethnic families, including those from Traveller communities; and lone parents. In addition, the centre prioritises those from the local authority's target groups which include: teenage mothers and pregnant teenagers; children living in low income or workless households; children living in families where there is domestic abuse, substance abuse or adult mental health problems; and children living in vulnerable circumstances.

## Inspection judgements

### Access to services by young children and families **Good**

- Most families with children under the age of five living within the centre's reach area, and nearly every child living in the areas of greatest deprivation, are registered with the centre. A large majority of these families and children take part in the centre's activities.
- The centre's strategies are successful in ensuring that a large majority of families from priority groups engage with the centre. Every known person or family from many of the priority groups uses the centre's services regularly.
- The centre has constructive relationships with a wide range of professionals, and its links with health visitors are particularly strong. These individual partners are good at referring people to the centre if they feel families would benefit from any of the centre's activities. In turn, the centre is diligent in following up these referrals to ensure that those who are most in need and those who are expecting children have access to relevant services which have a positive impact on their well-being.
- The centre does its best to keep families informed about its services and to make it possible for families who do not live within easy reach of the centre to access some services. Staff run sessions in outlying areas, such as Potton and Wrestlingworth. They attend local antenatal clinics and local playgroups to keep in touch with families and inform them about the centre's services. The centre commissions crèche services so that parents can attend courses without having to worry about childcare arrangements. Transport arrangements are made for those who do not have their own transport.
- The centre has worked hard to identify families whose two-year-old children are eligible to receive free nursery education. As a result, a very large majority of eligible children are now attending good-quality nurseries or pre-schools. Most three- and four-year-old children also take up their entitlement to free nursery education.
- The centre's work to identify every family with young children in its reach area and to ensure they have access to relevant services is hampered by a lack of sharing of data and information by some organisations. For example, the health services have stopped sharing live birth information. The local authority knows which families are eligible to receive free nursery education for their two-year-olds, but does not pass this information on to the centre, although agreement has been reached for this to happen in future.

### The quality of practice and services **Good**

- The centre provides a good range of high-quality services for expectant mothers, parents and young children. Some sessions, such as 'Laburnum Tots' and the 'Jitterbugs' dance session, are open to any parent and young child to attend. They are well planned, meet children's needs well and provide parents with useful ideas for encouraging their children's development at home. Parents greatly value the opportunity these occasions provide for them to meet other parents and for their children to develop social skills.
- Many activities meet specific needs, particularly for those from the centre's priority groups. Sessions to help parents deal with fussy eaters, manage their families' finances, bond with their children through baby massage, and persevere with breastfeeding, are all well received by participants. Parents say that the courses are delivered extremely well and that they help them to learn new skills and improve their families' circumstances.

- The quality of care, guidance and support provided by the staff is excellent and has a major impact on reducing inequalities through the one-to-one support provided and referral to specialist agencies. Case files demonstrate that the staff's skills have a major impact on parents' lives, enabling them to deal with and overcome a wide range of problems and difficulties. One parent, for example, who overcame depression, gained new qualifications, developed a new supportive social network and is now working part-time as a result of the centre's input, said with feeling, 'There is a future out there now!' Others said they could not speak highly enough of the support they had received and referred to the centre as their 'lifeline'.
- The positive impact of the centre is seen in outcomes for parents and families. The proportion of mothers breastfeeding their children at six to eight weeks is above the local authority's average. A focus on activities to improve healthy lifestyles has seen a reduction in childhood obesity which has fallen by about two percentage points. The proportion of children reaching a good level of development at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage is above the national average. There is strong evidence to show that children who have engaged with activities at the children's centre do better than others, although some schools will not share information about children's achievement at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage.
- The centre evaluates each session it runs, but systems for evaluating the long-term impact of its services are not yet well developed. Not enough is done to ascertain why a few adults drop out of courses, although helpful reunions are held for some courses to refresh participants' understanding and to reinforce key concepts.

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

**Good**

- The centre manager provides good leadership and manages the day-to-day arrangements of the centre well. She receives excellent support from a dedicated team of staff who show great care and concern for the families in their area.
- The centre manages its resources efficiently, effectively and creatively to meet the needs of young children and families. Good use of facilities within the community and those offered by some partners helps the centre to overcome the restrictions imposed by the very limited, though attractive, accommodation at the centre itself. Staff use their excellent knowledge of a very wide range of partners, services and organisations to ensure that families are referred to the most appropriate person or place to meet their needs.
- The local authority and Action for Children provide good governance. Both organisations keep a close check on how well the centre is performing and what impact it is having on those from the centre's and local authority's priority groups. They hold the centre manager to account and set targets which have been influential in improving the centre's performance.
- The advisory board also makes a positive contribution to the running of the centre. Meetings of the board provide opportunities for a wide range of partners to share information, to identify different approaches to meeting the needs of families and to challenge and support the centre. Through its parent representatives, who solicit the views of other parents at the centre's activities, members of the board keep abreast of users' views of the centre. A small number of volunteers also make an excellent contribution to the running of the centre.
- The centre's good policies, procedures and practices for safeguarding and ensuring the welfare of children and families are effective. Staff have been well trained. Procedures are clearly displayed within the centre and communicated to families by staff. Whenever necessary, the centre initiates or collaborates with early health assessments. The centre engages fully with other agencies to support

families where children are in need, subject to child protection plans, or looked after but does not always receive information about all such children from the local authority or other agencies.

- Although the centre's practice and effectiveness have improved over the last two years since the engagement of the current centre manager and the oversight of Action for Children, the centre's self-evaluation and development planning are not analytical or rigorous enough. There are good procedures for monitoring the quality of activities and the effectiveness of staff, but subsequent analysis does not focus sufficiently on the long-term impact of its services. The centre's development plan identifies appropriate actions and shows a proper emphasis on improving outcomes for families, especially those from priority groups, but lacks clear strategic planning to achieve its aims.

## 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

<b>Unique reference number</b>	22630
<b>Local authority</b>	Central Bedfordshire
<b>Inspection number</b>	442846
<b>Managed by</b>	Action for Children on behalf of the local authority
<b>Approximate number of children under five in the reach area</b>	1394
<b>Centre manager</b>	Cathy Brighton
<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	Not previously inspected
<b>Telephone number</b>	01767 699019
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