

Little Paws Children's Centre

Old Groveway, Simpson, Milton Keynes, MK6 3AZ

Inspection dates 15–16 July 2014

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 registering are increasing over time, too few target children and families sustain engagement in the centre's services. The access data generated by the centre is different to that provided by the local authority and at times it is difficult to reconcile the two.
- There are too few workless parents taking up services that will improve their life chances, choices and pathways to employment. The centre is not checking up on how well parents progress when they are referred to partner services.
- Case files are not well maintained, as there is no clear expectation about their content and organisation and too often important information is missing. There is also too little evidence to show what impact interventions are having in helping children and families to move forward.
- Supervision is appreciated by staff, but the quality of recording one-to-one meetings is poor. The links between supervision, appraisal and staff training are not well made.
- The advisory board has good representation from parents and partners but often too few partners attend to ensure the meeting is worthwhile.

The children's centre has the following strengths:

- Leaders have set clear priorities with appropriate deadlines for making improvement. New staff have been well supported to take on their roles and responsibilities with enthusiasm and commitment in a time of significant change.
- There is good take up of free education places by two-, three- and four-year-olds.
- Good quality activities, such as 'Messy Play', help children and parents to enjoy learning together.
- The parents' voice is influential in shaping provision and having their say about centre services.
- Centre staff provide good quality and effective help, support and guidance to vulnerable

families. The ethos is inclusive, friendly and non-judgmental. As one parent said: 'We only came to the United Kingdom a year ago and Little Paws welcomed us with open arms.'

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

- Work with the local authority to ensure that accurate and reliable data about registration and access rates are available for those responsible for leadership and governance to use to monitor the centre's performance.
- Increase the levels of engagement of all target children and families so that the large majority benefit from appropriate services.
- Widen the services available to enhance the education, learning and skills of workless parents so as to improve their chances and choice in employment; and make sure their progress is tracked effectively.
- Sharpen case file maintenance so that all files are of a high standard. This should include making sure that key information is readily to hand and that actions taken and the impact of interventions are recorded clearly.
- Ensure the details of supervision meetings are recorded rigorously, and strengthen the link between supervision, performance management and professional development.
- Encourage partners to make sure that they are represented at an appropriate level at every advisory board meeting.

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 coordinator, staff, local authority officers, partners, parents and members of the advisory board.

The inspectors visited a number of activities held in the centre and at two outreach venues. The lead inspector observed 'Messy Play' jointly with the centre coordinator.

Inspectors also looked at a wide range of relevant documentation.

Inspection team

Christine Field, Lead inspector

Additional Inspector

Anthony Mundy

Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about the centre

Little Paws Children's Centre opened in 2009 and is managed directly by Milton Keynes local authority. An advisory group is established. The centre is situated in the borough's south locality with five other children's centres which are all stand-alone, and inspected separately. The centre shares a site with Charles Warren Academy, which is subject to separate inspection arrangements.

There are 1,101 children under five years of age living in the reach area, which is mixed economically and socially. Two communities, Tinkers Bridge and Simpson, are assessed as having the most needs. Approximately 22% of children live in workless homes, and 24% of families receive the childcare element of Working Tax Credit. Families are mainly White British, and some African, Asian and Eastern European families also live locally. Children's skills and knowledge on entry to early years provision vary but are generally below the levels expected for their age.

The centre offers a range of services for families and children under five years, including family support, health services, adult learning, parenting courses and a range of activity sessions. Besides running activities at the centre, the following outreach venues are also used: Wavendon Gate Pavillion, Heronsgate School, Wavendon Gate School and Tinkers Bridge Meeting Place.

Priority groups are identified as: two-year-olds entitled to free early education, teenage parents, children in workless homes, children from minority ethnic backgrounds, fathers and lone parents.

A process is underway to arrange the 20 children's centres in Milton Keynes into seven clusters, each of which will be managed by a cluster coordinator. Little Paws Children's Centre is currently located within Milton Keynes south locality, but from 8 September it will transfer to the central locality to be part of a cluster with two other children's centres.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Requires improvement

- The centre's self-generated access data present a more positive picture of target children and families' engagement than the local authority information. This requires improvement because it is confusing for stakeholders when trying to track and assess the impact of the centre's work to increase the access to services by young children and families.
- Registrations are rising. This is due to the effective drive by the centre coordinator supported by the well-conceived marketing programme that lets local families know what the centre has to offer. At over 80%, the level of registrations in the two most deprived communities is very creditable. However, engagement levels are too variable: local authority information shows a minority of children accessing the centre's services, with just 22% engaging in activities more than five times.
- The local authority information shows that some families choose to use other children's centres but what effect this has is not being tracked closely enough. At 65%, the proportion of lone parents using the centre is higher than the level for other target groups. Forty seven per cent of families from minority ethnic backgrounds currently use the centre and those

who spoke to inspectors have a high degree of satisfaction with the services they use.

- In response to local needs, the centre puts on two sessions a week at Wavendon Gate School, which parents say helps them more easily access services; but currently the take-up by target groups is not yet the large majority.
- The good partnership with health professionals helps centre staff to make early contact with the parents of new born babies, and three quarters are already 'signed up' for services. Families with assessed needs are guided to the centre for support, including specialist help where this is required.
- A much higher proportion of two-year-olds than is seen nationally take up their free education place in good or better quality early years settings. The centre has begun to meet regularly with education providers to discuss areas of mutual concern. The early years teacher has devised a tracking tool to chart the progress of this target group when they access centre services; currently eight children are part of the pilot.

The quality of practice and services

Requires improvement

- There is a good range of services which are well located to enable children living locally to access them, but too little attention is being given to checking what impact they have, and this requires improvement. The centre is working actively to target its work on those who need it most at the same time as running sessions such as 'Stay and Play' which anyone can drop into.
- Volunteering opportunities are helping some parents build confidence and skills and some have found paid work as a result. However, the take-up of the services available to improve employability, particularly by workless parents, is too low; and when parents are signposted to courses, their progress is not sufficiently tracked.
- Family support workers carry a heavy caseload and at times have been stretched to meet the demand. Time pressures have led to case notes having the appearance of being rushed, with important details such as the contact details of the agencies involved in supporting families not being clearly recorded. Leaders do audit the files but are not checking closely enough to make sure that practice improves.
- The centre has a clear focus on improving outcomes. All activities have a clear rationale for reducing inequalities. All sessions observed by inspectors were of good quality, with 'Messy Play', 'Toddler Time' and 'Ragdolly Annas' all promoting the benefit of positive learning through play. Good quality 'learning journeys' are being developed to track the progress of target children, and these have potential to help the staff measure the impact of centre services on children's achievement in going forward.
- Health outcomes are improving. Sessions such as 'Cook for Life' help target families to know more about nutrition and how important a healthy lifestyle is to combatting obesity.
- A wide range of information is available to parents; safeguarding matters are given high profile in display. Parents are helped to improve their parenting skills by attending specific programmes and also build their knowledge about how to ensure their child's well-being by undertaking first-aid courses, having home safety checks and finding out about possible dangers when they go on a trip to the 'Safety Centre'.
- 'Me Time' sessions provide a range of experiences that help raise awareness about child development matters and offer parents 'downtime' while their children are looked after in the crèche. Parents occasionally share their own skills such as Indian Head Massage, and this helps build a cohesive and harmonious community. One parent told inspectors, 'From day one LPCC has been a warm and friendly place to play and learn'.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

Requires improvement

- The centre coordinator is leading the centre positively during a period of significant change as the 'clustering arrangements' come to fruition and staffing changes are imminent. Resources are being used efficiently to make sure that the services for children and families continue as usual and satisfaction levels remain high. Focus has been given to delivering quality services, but as yet there is only limited checking on their impact in improving the outcomes for target children and families, and this requires improvement.
- The local authority advisers undertake a range of monitoring including monthly performance visits. They recognise the centre's frustrations about the timeliness and accuracy of data, but to some extent have been too accepting of information provided during their visits. For example, in March this year '92% engagement' was recorded in the visit notes, which is clearly not accurate.
- The staff team, which came together in autumn 2013, is well bonded and keen to make sure that families experience a seamless service. Clear priorities have been set to help guide improvement and there has been good challenge by the local authority to make sure that those responsible for leadership and governance evaluate the centre's performance realistically.
- Supervision arrangements are viewed positively by staff. Although handwritten notes capture key points about family casework, they do not include checks on staff performance or tie in training needs well enough. The 'next step' actions set out in some supervision records are not always recorded as being followed up by the next meeting.
- Governance is well established and very supportive, with four parents serving on the advisory board which is chaired by one of them. There is a range of partners represented in the membership but the attendance of some is irregular. This sometimes means that meetings fail to meet the terms of reference in terms of the numbers attending. As a result, continuity in decision making is undermined, as is the ability to challenge based on comprehensive knowledge of the centre's performance.
- The centre follows local safeguarding board procedures; staff vetting checks and training are up to date. Safeguarding practice is robust and staff readily challenge parents about mobile phone use or carrying hot drinks if they forget.
- There is a well understood referral process in place to support children in need beyond risk level 2, including those subject to a child protection plan. Concerns raised are directed to the Children and Families Referral Hub, which in most cases makes a timely assessment. The centre has an effective partnership with the children and families practice to ensure joined up approaches to meeting specific 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	21824
Local authority	Milton Keynes
Inspection number	447504
Managed by	The local authority
Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	1,101
Centre leader	Raksha Patel
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