

Flitwick Children's Centre

Main Base c/o Templefield Lower School site, Malham Close, Flitwick, MK45 1AJ

Inspection dates	17–18 September 2014
Previous inspection date	25 September 2013

Overall effectiveness	This inspection: Previous inspection:	Requires improvement	3
		is inadequate	4
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:

- Attendance at some sessions is low and staff are not seeing some families often enough to help them and their children.
- A number of families, such as lone parents, expectant mothers, fathers and families on low-income are not making the most of the services available.
- The take-up of funded early education places by eligible two-year-olds is low. As a result, families are missing opportunities to support their children's learning and development.
- The quality of group sessions is too variable. Staff do not always give sufficient guidance to parents and carers or check children's development promptly to help them make progress.
- Work to involve disabled children and those with additional needs who live in the area is insufficient because staff are not liaising effectively with specialist agencies.
- Leaders' arrangements for planning and checking that the quality of practice and services are good are not frequent or precise enough to address weaker aspects swiftly.
- The improved advisory board receives insufficient financial information. Members therefore have limited opportunities to influence the plans, to ensure that staff training is relevant and to review the allocation of all resources to key priorities.

The centre has the following strengths:

- Leaders, staff and members of the advisory board have made a concerted effort over the past 12 months to work well together. They have increased the number of children and families who receive specific help and services from the centre.
- Highly committed staff and an experienced service coordinator are consolidating recent initiatives and improving what the centre offers to families.
- Family support workers know the families they work with very well. Parents and carers really value the emotional support and practical help staff provide, particularly at times of crisis. They say they feel welcome at the centre. Help for teenage and young parents is particularly effective.
- The large majority of children are in good health and are well prepared for school.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

- Increase further the number of families using services, particularly lone parents, expecting mothers, fathers and families on a low income.
- Improve the take up of free nursery education places by eligible two-year olds so that more are well prepared to start school.
- Ensure that all group sessions are a high quality by:
 - involving all parents and carers fully in their children's learning
 - observing closely the progress made by all children
 - recording accurately and promptly the strengths and gaps in children's development
 - and using this information to plan the next stage of their learning.
- Improve leadership and governance by:
 - ensuring plans are precise and indicate clear links between staff training and areas for development
 - providing detailed financial information to the advisory board so that members can check future plans and match resources well to key priorities
 - monitoring and evaluating more frequently the quality of sessions to improve practice and inform future activities
 - forging closer links with professionals who support children who have a disability or additional needs to involve more families in the centre's activities.

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 one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and two Additional Inspectors.

The inspectors held meetings with the interim service co-ordinator and the newly-appointed service coordinator. They met senior staff from Action for Children and representatives from the local authority. They also met family support workers, the early intervention social worker and a range of partners. These included representatives from health services, education, the voluntary sector and adult learning and training services. The inspectors met members of the advisory board. They spoke to parents and carers, grandparents and volunteers.

The inspectors visited activities taking place at the centre in Flitwick and at community venues in Lidlington Methodist Church, Flitton and Greenfield Village Hall and on the Cranfield University campus. Leaders from the local authority, Action for Children and the service coordinators attended the inspectors' team meetings.

Inspectors observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation including the centre's self-evaluation, the action and development plans, the local authority monitoring report, parents and carers' satisfaction surveys, a sample of case studies and safeguarding practice, policy and procedures.

Inspection team

Marianick Ellender-Gelé	Her Majesty's Inspector
Tara Street	Additional inspector
Maggie Fobister	Additional inspector

Full report

Information about the centre

Flitwick Children's Centre was formed in 2012 following changes to the way services were delivered by children's centres in the local authority including the amalgamation of several smaller centres. The centre was first inspected as a stand-alone centre in September 2013 and was judged as inadequate. The reach covers a wide rural area of Central Bedfordshire and includes a large number of villages, from Cranfield and Woburn in the west to Clophill, Silsoe and Barton in the east.

Flitwick Children's centre operates from a small purpose-built building adjacent to Templefield Lower School (URN 412432) and the Windmill Pre-School (URN EY367651) both of which are subject to separate inspection arrangements. The reports can be found on the Ofsted website.

The centre is managed by Action for Children which is commissioned by the local authority. It is governed by an advisory board of key partners. The centre provides early education, health services, family support and adult learning courses. Most children enter early education with skills that are in line with those expected for their age. After the September 2013 inspection, significant staff changes took place. The chair of the advisory board was appointed in January 2014. An interim service coordinator managed the centre until the new service co-ordinator was available to take up this role on 15 August 2014. Two out of the other five staff members are also new.

The centre's reach area includes 3149 children under five years of age, the majority of whom are White British. The largest minority ethnic groups come from overseas to study at Cranfield University and there are smaller numbers of Black African and Asian families. The area is mixed socially and economically with mostly affluent communities and small pockets of deprivation, particularly in East Flitwick. Data shows that 4.5 % of children are living in low income and workless households and 11.3% are lone parents.

The centre has identified a number of families with high levels of needs. They are those living in poverty, victims of domestic abuse, families from a range of cultural backgrounds, particularly transient families studying at Cranfield, lone parents, expectant teenagers, teenage or young mothers and fathers.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Requires improvement

- The centre is not yet managing to maintain meaningful contact with the majority of parents and carers. This means that a number of children and families, such as expectant mothers, lone parents, fathers and some families on low-income are not making the most of the services offered by the centre.
- Only a minority of two-year-old children who are eligible for free nursery education take up their places. As a result, a large number of these children are not accessing the support they need at an early enough stage in their lives. The vast majority of three- and four-year-olds access their funded early education place in the wide range of good or

better early years provision in the area.

- Attendance at some sessions is low, although participation rates are improving. Efforts to help families to attend, such as offering taxi tokens to those who live in isolated villages, are beginning to show some impact. Parents and carers appreciate the efforts made to remind them of activities, such as through the use of e-mails, texts and other social media.
- Over the last year, targeted leaflet distribution to local schools, attendance at baby clinics, pre-school and toddler groups and promotion at fun days have resulted in an increased awareness of the centre's services. As a result, the large majority of children and families, including in East Flitwick, are now registered with the centre. Insufficient work has been done to involve families with disabled children or those with additional needs.
- Access is good for teenage and young parents. They are given priority and effective support to participate fully in activities and courses. The Young Parents' Group is making a positive contribution to young parents' well-being.
- Family support workers have a good knowledge of the varied and often difficult issues surrounding some families, including those experiencing financial difficulties, those new to the country and adults experiencing domestic abuse. Experienced staff provide good advice, often in the home, to ensure families have the individualised help they need, particularly at times of crisis. Parents and carers speak highly of the trust they have in the staff and feel able to share concerns at an early stage.

The quality of practice and services

Requires improvement

- Some opportunities are missed to exploit children's innate curiosity and develop their skills. In addition, the low number of families identified as most in need attending group sessions reduces the centre's impact on improving outcomes and life chances for all children.
- The assessment and monitoring of children's development are not yet completed across all activities. As a result, children who already have high levels of development are not always moved on quickly enough. Tracking those most in need to help them make more rapid progress is not embedded in day-to-day practice.
- Although prompt contact is made with students from overseas who live in and around Cranfield, staff do not make sufficient use of multi-cultural resources to support families in developing their children's speaking skills.
- The range of activities provided, either at the centre in Flitwick or at venues in the community, is suitable. Sessions such as the 'Toy Library', 'Early Explorers', 'Chattertots' and 'Stay and Play' are appreciated by parents and carers. Grandparents said that they are very pleased to attend these groups as they often feel isolated. The community fun days and the visits to Mead Farm are successful in encouraging families to socialise and in developing children's knowledge and communication skills.
- The majority of children achieve well by the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage. The gap between those identified as most in need and all children living in the reach area is

narrowing and is lower than the local and national figures. The Early Years Professional identifies the lower schools where children's development is below average so that support can be targeted to these specific areas.

- Steady progress is being made on improving adult learning and training. Parents and carers, including teenage and young parents, are developing their employability skills and gaining qualification in English and mathematics. They are also more confident at managing their personal budgets. Good training opportunities are provided through family learning and the MK Dons programme.
- The centre promotes active lifestyles through, for example, 'Play Stop Gym' and 'Preamble' health walks, particularly in areas where obesity rates are the highest. Staff offer good advice to families and the number of mothers sustaining breastfeeding at six-to-eight weeks is just above the local and national averages.
- Family support workers have a deep knowledge of the varied and often difficult issues surrounding some families, including those experiencing financial difficulties, domestic abuse, mental health issues or who are new to the area. Parenting programmes, such as 'Parent Puzzle' and 'Parents as Teacher First' are effective. The mothers who spoke to inspectors clearly explained the huge benefits of the 'Freedom Programme' and the 'Bromford Support Drop-ins'.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

Requires improvement

- Leaders are not yet entirely successful at engaging the majority of families from most deprived groups. Over the past year, some staff turnover has limited the possibility of involving a greater number of families. Registrations, however, have increased. Staffing is now stabilising and the newly-appointed service coordinator knows what needs to be done. Her evaluation of practice, following a joint observation of an activity with inspectors, is accurate. The centre has the capacity to become a good centre.
- The different plans are confusing. Coherence is lacking between the post-Ofsted action plan, written to address the key recommendations of the September 2013 inspection, and the centre's annual development plan. Performance targets, timescales and success measures are not always precise. Staff attend training events but these opportunities are not closely linked to key priorities identified in the plans.
- Some actions to improve the governance of the centre have been successful. The new chair and members of the advisory board have the necessary expertise to check progress. Board members understand the data and performance. However, they receive insufficient financial information to genuinely influence the plans, including staff training and check the impact of their decisions. Volunteers and parents' champions have been identified to strengthen parents' and carers' representation on the board but this initiative is too recent to show whether they are helping to shape services.
- Over the past year, there were too few direct observations of practice. Consequently, actions required to improve the quality of some sessions have not always been prompt or precise. This is now being remedied. Professional supervision and appraisals ensure that supportive meetings take place. These are appreciated by staff, stimulate their

commitment and contribute to their professional development.

- Partnerships with health professionals are developing. Staff changes and pressure on time have, in some cases, made it difficult for staff to work together, for example with midwives and health visitors and to encourage take-up of free nursery education places at the two-year-old checks. Although a few disabled children and those with additional needs are known to the centre, insufficient liaison is made with relevant professionals to ensure that more families access the centre's services.
- Partnerships with social care services and early years providers are strong. Centre staff work closely with an experienced early intervention social worker to ensure that families receive prompt support. The Early Help Access and Referral Hub allows agencies to work collaboratively to support looked-after children, children identified as in need, children subject to child protection plans and families supported through the Early Help Assessment (EHA) process used in Central Bedfordshire. This reduces the risk of harm to children.
- Most staffing and resources are used efficiently although the advisory board has insufficient oversight of this aspect of the centre's work. A strength of the staff team is their enthusiasm and dedication to cover each other's work during staff changes and when vacant positions are not yet filled. During this inspection, leaders were made aware of easily-rectifiable hazards in some premises to ensure the safety of families and children.

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	21185
Local authority	Central Bedfordshire
Inspection number	447541
Managed by	Action for Children on behalf of the local authority

Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	3149
Centre leader	Hazel Jeffrey (Service Coordinator)
Date of previous inspection	25 September 2013
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