

BRA2 Harlequin Children's Centre

Spa Road, Witham, CM8 1NA

Inspection dates	10–11 December 2014
Previous inspection date	Not Previously Inspected

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

Summary of key findings for children and families

This is a good centre.

- A vast majority of families are known to the centre. Excellent partnerships, including with the on-site health team has resulted in a large majority of targeted groups of families having access to a wide range of good quality services, support, advice and care.
- Children are well prepared for school. They enjoy the high quality children's sessions and make good progress as a result. Most of them take up free early education places.
- Parents satisfaction rates are high. Adults improve their parenting and employability skills. They develop in confidence, make new friends and learn about keeping their families safe and healthy. Parents are well involved in volunteering, centre decision making and the planning of its services.
- Strong leadership, management and governance have resulted in improvement to services and good outcomes for families. The local authority and the advisory board support and challenge the centre's performance well. Tracking of the progress that families make is robust.
- Systems and processes to monitor the quality of services and to support the development of staff are good and help to improve further the quality of the centre's work.
- The centre manager and her staff are highly skilled. Passionate about supporting families and reducing barriers. They work really well as a very strong team across four sites.
- Arrangements for safeguarding are rigorous, thereby ensuring the safety of children and their families who are accessing its services, including in their homes.

It is not outstanding because:

- There are insufficient courses available to improve adults' English, mathematics and computing skills and opportunities to gain formal qualifications.
- The local authority does not systematically inform the centre about children who are vulnerable or at risk of harm.
- The local authority does not have a procedure for sharing data about the progress of children who attended the children's centre and are now in school.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

- Increase the opportunities for further education and training, especially for parents from target groups by:
 - providing appropriate courses for parents to develop their English, mathematics and computing skills and opportunities to gain formal qualifications.
- Further improve the governance of the centre by:
 - ensuring that the local authority promptly informs the children's centre of details of those children who are vulnerable or at risk, including those who are subject to child protection plans.
 - developing the leadership and governance of the centre through effective data sharing agreements from the local authority regarding children who attended the centre and are now in school.

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: a local authority manager; representatives from the advisory board; 4Children manager; data manager; parents; volunteers; and centre staff. Inspectors also met with early years providers; nursery manager; family liaison officer; social care team manager; citizen's advice bureau and Jobcentre Plus advisors; members of the health team and staff from Essex adult and community learning.

The inspectors observed: 'Sunshine', 'Bumps and Babies' and 'Young Parents' sessions.

The inspectors visited Harlequin Children's Centre and two of its delivery sites, Silver End and Roundabout Children's Centre.

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

Inspection team

Lead inspector Qaisra Shahraz	Additional Inspector
Ann Taylor	Additional Inspector
Anthony Mundy	Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about the centre

One of 20 centres in Essex, Harlequin Children's Centre is a stand-alone centre, which is located in Witham. Opened in 2008, it operates from a purpose-built site. It was recently merged with three other children centres, Silver End, Roundabout and The Valley. The centre offers its services across the reach area, which includes Witham and Silver End wards. It provides a range of services including family support, health services, adult learning and support for childminders to meet its core purpose.

There are 3,540 children under five years of age living in the area, some parts of which are in the 10% to 30% most disadvantaged areas in the country. Most families are of White British origin. A few families come from minority ethnic groups. Unemployment is above the national average and 17.7% of families with children aged 0-5 years are dependent on workless benefits. Children's skills, knowledge and abilities on entry to early years provision are generally typical for their age.

There is also on-site linked day care provision known as Harlequin Daycare Nursery. It is subject to separate inspection arrangements and the report can be found at www.ofsted.gov.uk. The centre manager is responsible for the day-to-day running of the Harlequin Centre and the three other satellite sites. The governance of the centre is provided by the organisation 4Children which manages the centre on behalf of the local authority and is also held to account by the advisory board.

The main target groups identified by the centre are: children from workless families, teenage parents, lone parents, disabled children, children of disabled parents, and those families belonging to minority ethnic backgrounds.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Good

- Referrals from other organisations, the efficient use of information about new births, and excellent partnerships with health professionals are helping to ensure that almost all children are known to the centres.
- Regular prenatal, postnatal and child health checks are held at the centre. This means that most expectant mothers and families have good access to early childhood services.
- A large majority of targeted families attend the centre on a regular basis. Managers and staff know their local communities really well. Staff have good knowledge of the varied and difficult issues facing many families from the different groups they are working with, such as teenage and lone parents, workless families and parents with disabled children.
- Outreach work and information are effectively used to identify needs and support families to access the services they require. Some of these services are open to all families and some are more targeted. For example, children with disabilities and special educational needs are well supported through the monthly specialist Saturday, 'Stay and Play' sessions.
- Children who access children's services are well prepared for school. Their parents' too are well prepared for the transition through sessions such as, 'Flying Start'. A very large majority of parents are well supported to access free places for their children in good quality early years nurseries. Where there is a shortage of places in nurseries, children are referred to local childminders. All these childminders benefit from the quality support and training provided by the centre.

- Families benefit from being signposted to local or other services across the four sites and those of various partners. For example, the Information and Advice Co-ordinator (ACL) and Jobcentre Plus advisor make regular visits to the centre.
- They provide guidance on benefits and gaining employment for lone parents. Families also benefit from good-quality health and safety information amply displayed through vibrant displays which helps them to be healthy and safe.
- Staff are highly committed to improving families' personal circumstances, emotional well-being and helping to reduce barriers. One grateful male, lone parent informed inspectors; 'The staff helped me with everything, even with the washing machine. I can't rate them highly enough, they have always been there for me.'

The quality of practice and services

Good

- The Harlequin Children's Centre is very much the hub of the community and the staff ensure that there is a warm, welcoming and supportive atmosphere within the centre. Utmost care is taken to deliver good quality services and maintain an attractive and stimulating learning environment on all sites used by families.
- Parents and children benefit from a wide range of enjoyable and well-planned sessions. Activities overseen by skilled early years staff and clearly focused on accelerating children's learning and development are helping to ensure that most children reach the levels expected of them by the end of Reception. Current data for 2014 shows the gap in attainment between children eligible for free school meals and others, is narrowing, whilst the proportion reaching a good level of development is improving, year on year.
- Adults improve their parenting skills, through courses like, 'It's Just a Phase' and 'Understanding Children.' They develop in confidence, make new friends and learn about keeping their families healthy and safe. First step courses like, 'Sunshine' help to enhance the self esteem of those parents experiencing personal difficulties. However, there is limited adult provision for literacy, mathematics, computing, and opportunities to gain formal qualifications.
- Progress tracking of children's and adults' outcomes is robust. The centre keeps comprehensive family files and is successfully able to track outcomes through the use of 'family pathway' system. Similarly, a combination of engaging learning journals which parents take pride in, and the recording of their child's progress by using 'progress wheels' ensures parents know best how to help their children develop.
- Good volunteering opportunities enable parents to contribute well to centre activities, such as fundraising, which help them to build their confidence and make progress into employment. Many have found paid employment. Some parents have also become active members on the advisory board.
- Health outcomes are good. The rate for breastfeeding is improving and a higher proportion of mothers than before are sustaining breastfeeding at six-to-eight weeks. Courses such as, 'Big Cook, Little Cook' are helping families to develop healthy lifestyles. Similarly, there are cooking sessions as part of the 'Young Parents Group' which enables teenage parents to learn how to cook healthy foods for themselves and their children.
- Family case files are maintained to a high standard by staff. They are rigorously audited by managers and this contributes to the effective protection of children and families.

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

- The centre and its three satellite sites are well-led and managed, and effectively address the needs of families in the local communities. The centre manager and staff are well supported and challenged to continually improve by the local authority, the 4Children managers and the advisory board. The advisory board members comprise a wide range of skilled community partners and parents.
- Performance management arrangements are highly effective and extremely well-embedded. Managers rigorously monitor the centre's performance by routinely reviewing its progress against centre priorities and targets as comprehensively detailed in 'work plans', through annual conversations, observations and supervisions. Unannounced monitoring visits by external professionals to carry out 'spot checks' of processes and services further ensures a robust assessment of quality.
- Resources are efficiently used across all four delivery sites. The centre manager and her staff are highly skilled and demonstrate good teamwork. They are extremely valued for their work by families, managers and partners.
- Users' views are actively sought. The parents' board, with its 'You said' and 'We did' display, shows the actions taken in response to their views and provides useful feedback on what is being improved.
- Safeguarding of families is a top priority of the centre, including the safeguarding of babies through regular, 'Save a Baby Roadshows' sessions. Staff effectively implement policies and procedures to reduce any risk of harm to children and use the Shared Family Assessment (SFA) to assess children's needs.
- Multi-agency working results in the centre staff effectively supporting some families at risk of harm and children subject to child protection plans, looked after children and children in need. However, the centre is not aware of all of these children in the area as there is not protocol in place to share this information. Centre managers rightly identify that this poses a potential risk to children and families.
- The centre is committed to inclusion and reducing inequalities. A crèche is provided for the majority of parenting courses to ensure families who need the most help can access the services they need. The centre celebrates diversity well through vibrant displays which use positive images of people from around the world.
- The local authority and the centre do not have a procedure for sharing information about the progress of children who attended the children's centre and are now in school. This makes it much more difficult for the centre to effectively follow children's progress in the longer term, as they move through school.

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	20382
Local authority	Essex
Inspection number	452146
Managed by	The local authority
Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	3,540
Centre manager	Sarah Mason
Date of previous inspection	Not Previously Inspected
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