

HAR3 Potter Street Children's Centre

Potter Street Primary School, Carters Mead, Harlow, CM17 9EU

Inspection dates	10–11 February 2015
Previous inspection date	Not previously inspected

Overall effectiveness	This inspection:	Requires improvement	3
	Previous inspection:	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:

- There are not enough priority families, including lone parents and those not in employment, benefiting from the centre's work.
- Once families from some priority groups have engaged with centre services there is no clear plan of how the centre will support them to improve their circumstances. Attendance by children and families from these groups is not routinely monitored by the centre.
- Session planning and evaluation does not always reflect Early Years Foundation Stage outcomes and does not sharply focus on meeting the needs of priority children, recording the progress they make, or the next steps needed to support their development.
- Staff do not keep a record of the progress adults make after they complete courses with the centre and don't know if learners continue into further training or employment.
- The centre does not operate from one clear plan for improvement. Actions identified through an evaluation of its own work, and actions required to meet local authority monitoring requirements are not well reflected in the plan.
- Effective local oversight and challenge of the centre's work by the Children's Centre Community Group has not taken place since the summer of 2014.

This centre has the following strengths:

- Registrations are increasing so that most families are now known to the centre.
- Children and families who access services are well cared for and supported by staff. Families value the help they receive and greatly enjoy the services the centre provides.
- The centre leader and staff team are committed to improving services and outcomes for the families they are supporting. Their efforts are beginning to have a positive effect on families' lives.
- Children and families are kept safe from harm through effective support underpinned by clear safeguarding policies and procedures.
- The local authority and Spurgeons provide effective management oversight and support to the centre.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that at least the large majority of children and families identified as priority groups are helped to raise their aspirations and improve their circumstances by:
 - engaging them in centre services
 - carefully monitoring their attendance and recording their progress so that they are supported to access relevant services and activities
 - making sure their needs inform the planning and evaluation of sessions.
- Strengthen planning and evaluation of services for children so that it reflects Early Years Foundation Stage outcomes, and ensure sufficient attention is given to planning and recording the needs and development of individual priority children.
- Record the progress that adults make and record their journey on to further training and volunteering to ensure their employability is improving.
- Improve governance, leadership and management by:
 - re-establishing the Children's Centre Community Group or its replacement
 - creating one development plan that includes all priorities, and is in line with local authority requirements

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 parents, centre staff, members of the Children's Centre Community Group, representatives from professional partnerships including health, social care and early years providers, commissioned body representatives and officers from the local authority.

Inspectors observed the centre's work and undertook two joint observations with centre staff.

Inspectors took into account parents' views as expressed directly to them during the inspection, as well as through their recorded evaluations about the centre's work.

Inspectors analysed a range of relevant documentation such as the centre's checks on its performance, development plans and data, information relating to safeguarding and a selection of case files.

Inspection team

Lead inspector Mary Dudley

Additional inspector

Joan Lindsay

Additional inspector

Ann Taylor

Additional inspector

Full report

Information about the centre

HAR3 Potter Street Children's Centre is one of five children's centres forming the West Essex Cluster. It operates from two sites, Potter Street Children's Centre and the ABC delivery Site as well as a number of community venues in Harlow. The centre is managed by Spurgeons, a national children's charity, on behalf of Essex County Council, supported by the Children's Centre Community Group.

The children's centre building at Potter Street is co-located with Potter Street Academy (URN 115061), First Steps Play Group (URN 402222) and School Gate Nursery (URN 403972), all of which are subject to separate inspection arrangements. Reports are available at www.reports.ofsted.gov.uk.

The centre delivers a shared programme of services with Tree House Children's Centre (URN 21369) and Meadows Children's Centre (URN 21370) which are also subject to separate inspection arrangements. Together they provide family support, adult and family learning, early education and health services.

The area the centre serves has pockets of deprivation amongst more affluent areas. Four communities are in the top 12% most deprived in England. 405 children under five years of age are living in households where families are in receipt of out of work benefits.

There are approximately 2375 children under five years of age living in the centre's reach area, of which 45% live in the more deprived communities. The large majority (89%) are White British with a very small percentage from other ethnic groups. Children enter early years provision with skills and knowledge below those expected for their age.

Families face a varied range of challenge. The centre has identified its main priority groups as: lone parents and families living in workless households; those living in the most disadvantaged communities, and children with a disability (including speech and language).

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Requires improvement

- Most of the families in the area are registered with the centre. Midwives encourage expectant mothers to register with the centre at an early stage for support and advice. However, the absence of an information sharing agreement across the County, until very recently, has meant the centre has not had access to some important information including details of new births. As a result of the new agreement the centre is beginning to be better informed about the children and families living in its area.
- There is a comprehensive system in place for recording attendance and participation in centre services. However, the information is not used in any systematic way to monitor the attendance of children and families from priority groups. Consequently the centre does not know if they are accessing and engaging with the most relevant services.
- Engaging with single parents, families that are not employed and those living in the most disadvantaged communities has proved a challenge for centre staff. Despite promoting centre services through a range of mediums, and providing services and activities out in the community, the large majority of these families are not yet registered with the centre and benefiting from centre services.
- Almost all children under five with special needs in the area are known to the centre. Staff work successfully to support families to access appropriate services to meet their children's needs and

where necessary complete the appropriate assessments. As a result these children are well-prepared for when they attend early years provision.

- The centre actively encourages parents to take up the entitlement for their two, three or four year old child to access good quality early education. Most eligible children have taken up the entitlement and are in appropriate pre-school settings. However, for some families this has meant attending settings outside the area.
- The small staff team provides a busy timetable of activities across its area. There is a good mix of sessions, some of which are open to all families, such as 'Come and Play', while others such as 'Talking with Tots' are aimed at improving speech and language skills. Activities for some groups are offered at other children's centres, such as 'Sparkles' which provides support for parents and children with additional needs at Meadow's Children's Centre and 'Upwards with Downs' a support group for families with children who have Down's Syndrome at Tree House Children's Centre.

The quality of practice and services

Requires improvement

- The quality of practice and services requires improvement, because the impact of services is limited by the relatively low number of children and families from two of the three priority groups accessing provision.
- Children and families are provided with stimulating and interesting activities. 'Big Cook, Little Cook', 'Development Matters' and 'Come and Play' are just some of the well-attended sessions that children and parents enjoy.
- Learning journals show children actively engaging in a variety of creative and exploratory activities. However, planning and evaluation is general, does not always reflect Early Years Foundation Stage outcomes and not enough attention is given to planning and recording the needs and development of individual priority children.
- There has been a significant increase in the percentage of children in the area who achieved a good level of development by the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage so that it was above the national average in 2014. However, the gap between children eligible for free school meals and their peers has widened. Links with pre-school settings and schools are improving but are still at an early stage.
- Records of adult users' achievements are limited and their successes are not gathered together productively. Staff have only very patchy information on how adults get on when they are signposted to courses. This means that they have only partial information when planning future services that specifically enhance the employability of parents.
- The centre provides a range of promotional activities and support to encourage mothers to breastfeed, one example being 'Bosom Buddies'. Healthy living is encouraged through activities such as 'Jumping Beans' and 'Big Cook Little Cook'. Information is now starting to be shared by health services so that the centre can begin to measure how effective its work is in improving health outcomes.
- Effective integrated working through the Shared Family Assessment process helps keep children and families safe. The centre is highly successful in supporting parents and children subject to domestic abuse and has close working links with specialist local services. Child protection and child in need cases are well-supported and as a result circumstances are improving for some of these vulnerable children.
- Family support work is a strength. Staff provide individually tailored support in the home to families, some of whom have complex needs. Parents told inspectors: 'there is a lot of trust' and that workers 'definitely don't judge'. Their work is recorded in case files that, in the main, provide comprehensive details of the journey families are on and the positive impact of the centre's work in helping families get through times of crisis.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management**Requires improvement**

- The centre manager has been in post under a year and was appointed at a time of significant change and budget reductions. She has brought with her a real enthusiasm for the work of the centre and together with a small dedicated staff team is delivering an improving service. As a result, the number of families registered has increased, particularly in deprived areas, links with early years settings and schools are improving and parental satisfaction with services is high.
- A clear performance framework is in place and ensures effective support and challenge by the local authority and Spurgeons. Quarterly monitoring and an annual review ensure good management oversight. The local authority have very recently put in place an information sharing protocol to help make the monitoring even more rigorous, however it is too early to judge its impact.
- The centre is aware of its strengths and shortcomings. Monitoring by the local authority and Spurgeons enables the manager to identify changing priorities and to evaluate the centres' progress against agreed performance measures. However, the manager is currently working from a number of plans which is an unnecessary complication to her work.
- The Children's Centre Community Group provided support and operated as a critical friend for the centre. Meetings were well-attended and members, including parents brought a wealth of local knowledge to the table. However, the group has not met since July 2014 while discussions take place over whether it should be replaced by one group, with new terms of reference, which covers all children's centres in Harlow. As a result this aspect of governance has not been in place to hold the centre to account for its work.
- Supervision arrangements work well and support the professional development and performance management of staff. Staff and volunteers are safely recruited and effective safeguarding policies and procedures are in place.
- Resources, including staffing are appropriately allocated and used effectively. The range of activities offered to families is enhanced by shared access to community venues.
- Parents are consulted frequently and effectively through a range of mechanisms such as social media and consultations. Consequently families contribute well to shaping the services provided. Social media is also used to remind parents of safety and safeguarding issues, and changes to activities as a result parents are well-informed.

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

Unique reference number	21371
Local authority	Essex
Inspection number	454032
Managed by	Spurgeons on behalf of the local authority

Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	2375
Centre leader	Jessica Ricketts
Date of previous inspection	Not Previously Inspected
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