

Stokenchurch and Hambleden Valley Children's Centre

Betty Messenger Building, Park Lane, Stokenchurch, Buckinghamshire HP14 3TQ

Inspection date	17–18 March 2015		
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:

- The centre is working increasingly effectively to provide better access to services for children and families, especially those from Chiltern Rise which became part of the area served by the centre six months ago. However, overall, only a very small minority currently uses the centre's services regularly.
- Two thirds are registered but just over half of two-year-olds eligible for free education access the centre's services. This means the centre does not know whether children from the least advantaged backgrounds are getting the best start to their education.
- Systems to track the progress made by children and their parents when they access services run by the centre or its partners are under developed. The longer-term learning and development of centre-supported children are not clear due to shortfalls in the data provided by the local authority.
- Not enough parents are taking up opportunities to extend their education or work-based skills.
- Leadership and those responsible for governance hold an unrealistic view of the centre's effectiveness. This is because monitoring and quality assurance activities are not rigorous enough.
- The advisory board is supportive, but not sufficiently challenging in holding the centre to account.

This centre has the following strengths:

- The centre provides good support for children and families with the greatest need, including those subject to early help procedures.
- Health outcomes are good, and improving, because of the centre's effective work with partners to help families make well-informed choices about their diet and lifestyles.
- All three- and four-year-olds take up their free early education place. Children's achievement at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage is above both county and national averages.
- Parents participate in a range of programmes that helps meet specific needs, such as how to build strong family bonds, set firm boundaries and manage their child's behaviour with confidence.
- There are good opportunities for parents and children to air their views about the life and development of the centre.
- Well-conceived action plans include challenging targets to help drive further improvement.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

- Increase registrations so that most children sign up for services and at least the large majority from all priority groups attend regularly.
- Develop systems to track the progress that targeted children make when they attend centre activities and when they transfer to pre-school or nursery. Work with the local authority to find out how many of these children achieve a good level of development by the time they are five.
- Increase the opportunities for parents to access learning and skills opportunities, and check closely what progress they make over time.
- Strengthen managers' monitoring of the quality of services by focusing observations on the outcomes being achieved by children and families from priority groups. Use this information to sharpen self-evaluation processes.
- Enhance governance by ensuring that the advisory board keeps a close check on the centre's performance and challenges the centre to meet agreed targets, in order to improve overall effectiveness at a good pace.

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.

It was carried out at the same time as Marlow Children's Centre (URN 21937) with whom it works in collaboration. Some meetings with staff and partners were held jointly to avoid duplication.

The inspectors held meetings with Barnardo's senior leaders, the coordinator, staff, local authority officers, partners, volunteers, parents and members of the advisory board.

The inspectors visited activities including Stay and Play, Incredible Years and a child health clinic. Inspectors looked at a sample of case files in partnership with centre staff and case file tracking with the coordinator. The coordinator and district manager attended all team meetings.

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 also looked at a wide range of documentation.

Inspection team

Christine Field, Lead Inspector

Additional Inspector

Sandra Teacher

Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about the centre

The centre opened in 2009 as a stand-alone centre that works in partnership with other local children's centres, particularly Marlow. It serves the largely rural community around Stokenchurch and Radnage, Hambleden Valley, Greater Marlow and Chiltern Rise. The centre operates from two sites: one in Stokenchurch on the same site as the scout and guide headquarters, which is the main hub, and a satellite building at Lane End. The services provided include activities to promote early learning, family support, child and family health, adult learning and volunteering.

Barnardo's manages the centre on behalf of the local authority, along with 15 others across the county. The management team consists of the assistant director, the area manager and the local services coordinator. The coordinator is responsible for overseeing the team of staff, which works across the areas served by Stokenchurch and Hambleden Valley Children's Centre and Marlow Children's Centre. These centres work together as a 'collaboration'. The coordinator also manages another children's centre in the locality. The advisory board, chaired by a health visitor and comprising partners and parents, provides governance.

There are 1,085 children under the age of five years living in the area served by the centre. Most families are White British. The area is mixed socially and economically, with 12 distinct communities featuring small pockets of disadvantage and problems caused by the distance to services such as GPs, schools and libraries. Some 4% of children are living in homes where no adult is in paid work. Six months ago, the Chiltern Rise Ward, including an area of assessed disadvantage in Lane End, transferred from another children's centre. This increased the under five population by 45%. Children start in early education with skills and knowledge that are broadly typical for their age.

Priority groups identified by the centre are: children and families based at RAF Medmenham; children living in Lane End; two-year-old children eligible for free early education; and children and families in need of early help support.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Requires improvement

- Access requires improvement because a small minority of two-year-olds and only two in 10 children from Chiltern Rise use centre services regularly. Registrations, which currently stand at 63%, are rising due to the centre's effective actions. Most children and families in need of early help and those based at RAF Medmenham are now signed up for services.
- There is a high take up of free education places by three- and four-year-olds. The centre works with the parents it knows about to help them find a suitable place for their two-year-old child. Information about eligible children is now provided more regularly by the local authority, and staff have begun 'door knocking' and undertaking other activities to follow up those not yet accessing their entitlement.
- The use of the community bus enables centre-led services to take place at the RAF base; once a month, the health team joins centre staff to offer a child health clinic to families. Partnership work is well developed with RAF personnel who identify that, for some families, Tots Time is the highlight of their week. The centre has struggled to get hold of accurate baseline information but engages with 45 of the 61 children under five living in service quarters.
- There is effective contact with those subject to early help; this often includes one-to-one visits to family homes to ensure that assessed needs are well met. The centre works proactively to promote equalities and remove any barriers. For example, transport costs are provided for some isolated families, who find accessing services a challenge, to attend specific programmes.
- Close partnership work with health professionals, supported by the timely sharing of information about new births, is helping the centre staff to make early contact with parents-to-be and new

parents. The two-and-a-half-year development checks for children held at the centre are on track to reach the 95% target.

The quality of practice and services

Requires improvement

- Services are typically of a good quality, but it is recognised that more sessions open to all families and those specifically targeted at meeting specific needs are required at Lane End. Activities offered at the main hub in Stokenchurch, such as Stay and Play, are extremely well attended. However, currently, not enough children and parents from priority groups use them regularly, and this requires improvement.
- Centre activities are appropriately planned to promote the prime areas of children's learning. 'Learning journeys' are developing positively as a way of celebrating children's milestones and involving parents in supporting their child's learning and development. However, the progress of only a small number of children, including those from the RAF base, is being tracked. Although this is being extended to cover more children from priority families, the centre cannot yet demonstrate the full impact of its work.
- Centre staff visit early years settings in the area. They are beginning to share ideas and look at how well children who have accessed, or who are currently accessing, children centre services are getting on. Data on the achievement gap between Reception-age children from the least advantaged backgrounds and others have not been provided by the local authority since 2012. This is a missed opportunity to assist the centre in checking the longer term impact of its work to reduce inequalities.
- A parenting programme currently running is well attended, including by parents from Chiltern Rise. It is having a demonstrable impact on building their confidence and positive parenting skills. A good number of parents access first aid training which raises awareness about their child's well-being. The volunteering programme is well organised, and a small number of volunteers have moved into employment following their experiences at the centre. However, few parents take up education or skills training to enhance their work prospects. There are only cursory checks made on the progress made by the small number that do.
- Collaborative work with social care and professionals from the Family Resilience team, and the sharing of detailed information about vulnerable children and families at six-weekly Family Forum meetings, assist the centre in keeping in close contact with families subject to early help procedures. Centre staff attend all core group meetings; they typically take on the lead professional role when cases are stepped down. Case file recording is of good quality and well audited by managers. There are plans to undertake shared evaluations of the impact of joint working with social care in going forward.
- Breastfeeding rates are above the national level and childhood obesity rates are lower than average. Lots of useful information is on hand at the centre to help parents make informed choices. For example, sessions, such as Enough is Enough, raise parents' awareness about portion size. The excellent display about the sugar in popular drinks, 'Think before you drink', reminds parents about the need to check labelling carefully.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

Requires improvement

- Leadership, governance and management require improvement because insufficient focus has been given to ensuring that enough children and families from all priority groups engage in well-matched, accessible services that have demonstrable impact on improving their lives. There are, however, well-conceived action plans being implemented with challenging targets to help drive positive change in going forward.
- Managers undertake a wide range of very useful monitoring activities, such as 'Touch base' visits. However, these are not looking in sufficient detail at which families are taking up the centre's good quality services or what impact they are having on improving outcomes. Resources, which are limited, are shared equitably between the two centres. Some resources are sensibly being re-

allocated to ensure that the recently acquired area of Chiltern Rise has sufficient services to meet assessed needs.

- Over the last year the centre has experienced major changes in the area it serves and in staffing. It is currently affected by the re-commissioning of all Buckinghamshire's children's centres, the outcome of which will be known in a few months time. The coordinator, who joined nine months ago, has worked effectively to build a united staff team who is well qualified, shows good morale and is keen to play a full role in taking the centre forward. There is strong investment in the staff's continuous professional development, supervision and training to ensure that both individual needs and centre priority areas are addressed.
- The local authority provides effective support and challenge. Regular monitoring visits are undertaken, and information about which families are registered and using the services is provided. The report on the annual review of the centre's effectiveness received during the inspection rightly questioned the accuracy of the centre's self-evaluation.
- The advisory board has a wide membership of partners and parents who participate fully. There are strong links with the well-established parents' forum; these enable centre users' views to be taken into account in decision making. Board members, led by the health visitor, have very useful insights about the community and share ideas to help meet its needs. They receive a range of information about the centre's development, but are not sufficiently critical or challenging about its performance.
- Safeguarding practice and procedures are robust. Appropriate policies are in place and regularly updated to ensure that latest guidance is taken on board. All staff and volunteers are safely recruited, and parents say that they feel safe at the centre. Effective working with the link social worker helps to ensure that children who are subject to child protection plans, in need and in care, are appropriately protected.
- Parents have good levels of satisfaction with the centre, and say how welcoming and friendly it is. Children identify that the things that they like are 'getting messy' and 'eating raisin and carrot snacks'. Parents particularly like the good-quality resources, including the easily-accessible and well-used outdoor area. Parents feel that their views are listened to and taken into account. For example, the centre changed session times at Lane End to coincide with school pick-up, in response to parents' requests.

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 details

Unique reference number	22940
Local authority	Buckinghamshire
Inspection number	453968
Managed by	Barnardo's, on behalf of the local authority
Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	1,085
Centre leader	Debby Morgan
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Telephone number	01494 483140
Email address	stokenchurchandhambledenvalley@barnardos.org.uk

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