

Inspection report for Tonge Children's Centre

Local authority	Bolton
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Reporting inspector	Joanne Smith HMI

Centre governance	Bolton local authority
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Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
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Linked school if applicable	n/a
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	EY355289 Tonge Nursery

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Introduction

The inspection addresses the centre's contribution to:

- facilitating access to early childhood services by parents and carers, prospective parents and young children
- maximising the benefit of those services to parents and carers, prospective parents and young children
- improving the well-being of young children.

The report is made to the local authority and a copy is sent to the children's centre. The local authority may send the report to such persons it considers appropriate and must arrange for an action plan to be produced in relation to the findings in this report.

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and one Early Years Inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the head of centre, senior centre staff, front line workers, parents, local authority representatives and Job Centre Plus.

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

Inspection judgements

Grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Information about the centre

This is a phase 1 children’s centre providing the core offer to a community in the north of Bolton which is in one of the 10% most deprived wards in the country. The centre provides a range of integrated services including health, on site Early Years Foundation Stage provision, family support and access to adult education, and employment advice and support. It supports families from the whole local area and takes self-referrals and referrals from other agencies. Outreach provision is delivered in partnership with health visitors, midwives, family support, community workers and the United Reformed Church.

The head of centre strategically manages the services provided by the centre and leads those delivered by local authority staff and partners. The performance management of staff in the centre is the responsibility of their employing agency. The strategic management and development of the centre is the responsibility of the head of centre, with local support from the children’s centre advisory board.

Within the community served by the children’s centre the majority of children aged under four years are living in families dependant on workless benefits. The large majority of families are of White British heritage. Evidence indicates that the skills and knowledge that children have when they enter Early Years Foundation Stage settings is lower than those expected for their age

Overall effectiveness

The effectiveness of the children’s centre in meeting the needs of and improving outcomes for users and the wider community

3

Capacity for sustained improvement

The centre’s capacity for sustained improvement, including the quality of its leadership and management

3

Main findings

The outcomes for users are satisfactory overall. The centre is led and managed through a clear structure, with all statutory partners involved and governance being led by the local authority. Relationships between agencies are strong and productive in most areas. Where the centre conducts targeted work with the vulnerable families they engage with, there are tangible improvements in their lives. The centre cannot, however, clearly demonstrate the impact it has had on the outcomes for children and families across the whole reach area. As an example, levels of childhood obesity when children from the reach area enter the Reception Year at school are low and this is not traceable to work the centre or its partners undertake. Safety is given a high priority at the centre and this is reflected in the environment, good quality resources, and robust safeguarding policy and procedure documents.

The head of centre's role is currently too large to allow her to maintain the momentum needed to ensure that the success of the centre is tracked to produce more refined data. Consequently, the targets set in the centre action plan are not sufficiently sharp or ambitious. Where service users attend courses or sessions they are given the opportunity to evaluate and re-shape them for the future, this also happens on a session-by-session basis, for example, in the 'Sing along and Play' group. The centre does not complete any second-level evaluation of courses to assess their impact, for example, they do not know whether techniques learned by parents and carers about managing challenging behaviour are still effective some weeks after the end of the course. Therefore, whilst self-evaluation at the centre is good, this is not reflected in the targets to improve outcomes for users.

Service users are keen to access sessions at the centre and those who are able to gain places enjoy them. The variety and range of sessions delivered over time is broad, but resource allocation has a significant impact on the frequency of the delivery of some sessions, such as those that promote healthy eating. This is reflected in some parents' and carers' reluctant acceptance of the healthy choices on offer at the centre café that do not include fizzy drinks, chocolate or crisps.

Families receive information about the children's centre at an early stage in their child's life, along with contact through midwifery services also offered at the centre. It is well established as a place in the community where families know they can go to seek advice and support. Not all groups use the centre with the same regularity and, although they have contact with partners, such as health visitors, unless they are identified as in need of referral to the multi-agency resource panel, work to engage with them is not a continuous process. A group of Polish families, for example, was contacted and invited to the centre. They met and built up friendships amongst their group, but once established as a group of friends they have not been back to the centre and work on re-engaging with them has been slow.

The multi-agency resource panel at the centre uses a well thought through referral system that sits beneath the Common Assessment Framework. The close working that this brings has the benefit of early support being put in place for some families,

reducing the risk of higher levels of involvement in the future. The centre is accessible and promotes the diversity of the surrounding community with adequate levels of information. Families of children with special educational needs and/or disabilities are provided with relevant support because staff identify and recognise their needs at an early stage. The centre is not as successful as it could be in its work to promote inclusion of these families or those that reflect the whole of the reach area in the centre.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Increase user involvement, by:
 - engaging further with families in the community who are not accessing the centre's activities, particularly those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities
 - sustaining contact with identified groups, such as teenage parents and fathers
 - removing barriers to making contact with families who live in the area.

- Improve action planning, by:
 - enabling the head of centre to fully undertake the strategic management and development role
 - gathering and using more refined data that demonstrate where the centre has impacted on improving outcomes in the reach area and setting sharper and more ambitious targets for improvement based on this.

How good are outcomes for users?

3

The centre provides a safe haven for the vulnerable families who use it. Discussion with adults who attend the centre and observations of a variety of sessions indicate that users feel very safe when they are in the centre. The centre building is well cared for and respected by its users. Good parenting programmes are providing helpful strategies to support parents to manage their children's behaviour. This is having a noticeable impact on how well children behave. Parents and carers are said by one community partner to interact with their children much better and in the community 'families are seen as families' with 'less yelling' at children. A small number of centre users attend the parents' forum, which allows them to be adequately involved in shaping some aspects of the centre.

Families access and receive a good range of information about how to keep themselves and their families' safe through general leaflet and display information. This is raising parents' and carers' awareness of issues, such as fire and road safety. More targeted schemes such as a Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents project provide safety equipment and advice to those with specific needs. Despite such targeted projects, the number of admissions to the accident and emergency

department for children under five years old in the reach area has not seen a decline.

The multi-agency resource panel is highly valued by all those involved in it for its role in easing communication and speeding the access to support and services for the most vulnerable, identified families. Parents and carers are very appreciative of the support they receive from the centre. Families who have had support packages from the family support team describe this as 'fantastic' and say that they are more confident to speak to staff and ask for advice and support. As a result, they are developing better levels of independence, stability and routines. This is helping with areas such as punctuality and attendance at school.

Parents and carers have a developing understanding of how to keep themselves and their children healthy. The centre café, which offers a healthy choice menu, is well used and parents and carers choose fruit and vegetable snacks for their children whilst in the centre. They say they remember accessing healthy eating sessions at the centre, but this was a long time ago. Sessions for parents, carers and children are enjoyed by all and often include physical activities for the children that parents and carers appreciate as an opportunity for their children to be active.

The centre offers funded day care places to two-year-olds who are identified as in need of help in their speech and language by health visitors. Children's progress in their speaking and listening and personal and social skills is developing satisfactorily. This is apparent in the increase in the number of children in the area reaching the levels expected at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage. However, this cannot clearly be linked back to the work of the children's centre because assessment and tracking systems are not yet secure or embedded.

Parents and carers feel very welcome at the centre because of the friendly and approachable staff. The centre is recognised as a breastfeeding friendly space and some mothers are beginning to feed in spaces other than the dedicated breastfeeding room. The number of mothers initiating and sustaining breastfeeding saw a small but noticeable increase over a three year period following a package of sustained work on breastfeeding. The number of mother's sustaining breastfeeding has, however, reached a plateau in the last year.

These are the grades for the outcomes for users

The extent to which children, including those from vulnerable groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles	3
The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	2
The extent to which all users enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	3
The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships and users contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	3
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and	3

parents are developing economic stability and independence including access to training	
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How good is the provision? 2

A strength of the centre is the way in which it assesses the needs of its users. This stems from strong and robust relationships with partner agencies involved with the families of young children in the area. The multi-agency resource panel is a key to this success and its members are absolutely clear about their role in it. The very effective way it: shares information about who is working with a family; pools information and local knowledge about available services; and identifies which partner is best placed to work with the family or whether to refer them onto a more specialist service, results in tailored support packages for the most vulnerable families. There are still some barriers to overcome in the way that consent is obtained for health workers to register families with the children’s centre. This means that some families who do not need referral to the multi-agency resource panel miss out on accessing services available to them.

Some of the harder to reach groups in the area, such as the growing Eastern European community and teenage parents, do not engage with the centre as well as they could, therefore, the assessment of their need and provision for their learning and development is not as clearly defined as it is for others. This means that overall the range of services provided to meet the needs of the wider community is satisfactory. A recognised barrier to these groups accessing services on offer at the centre and engaging with the centre is a reluctance by adults to travel outside their immediate community, or feelings of being different. The model of locality working on some aspects, such as provision of a fathers’ group, also has the effect that take up from the centre is limited.

Over time the centre provides a wide range of courses aimed at improving outcomes for families and children. The way that some of these are resourced, for example healthy eating courses, leads to lengthy periods when they are not available at the centre. This limits the impact the learning has on the outcomes for service users. When adults complete a course or series of activities success is suitably celebrated; they receive a certificate of achievement and have a celebratory party. Adults are well signposted to where they can access advice and support to enter education, training and employment. Although it is unclear what the uptake of this is, there are indications that adults are open to the suggestion of training and employment. One mother is now on an access to higher education course with a view to attending university and another has found employment as a result of helping out at the centre with activities. Success at this level is, however, limited.

The range of advice and support given to users of the centre is broad and provided through a good range of partners who have specialist knowledge and skills. The well tailored services that result from the multi-agency resource panel are designed to help families to become independent and there is a strong sense from frontline workers that they are in the ‘business of enabling’ families. Guidance on family

finance is highly visible in displays around the centre and advice on benefits is available from a number of sources, including Jobcentre Plus and Churches Against Poverty. The result of this is families are very well supported in times of crisis with finance, food and debt management advice being given. 'Unbelievable what they've done for me' is how one parent reflected her appreciation of the centre's support for her.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users	2
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all users	3
The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of users and the wider community	3
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to users within the centre and the wider community	2

How effective are the leadership and management?

3

The head of centre skilfully leads a team of well-motivated, and user focussed professionals and commissioned services partners. They work in a cohesive way to safeguard the health, safety and well-being of the majority of children and families in the area. Robust procedures are in place to ensure that the adults working in the centre are suitable to do so; this includes workers from centre partners, such as Jobcentre Plus and the church. Early intervention to prevent families from reaching high levels of child protection or safeguarding concerns are managed very well through the multi-agency resource panel referrals from services, such as health visiting and self-referral from those who access the centre.

A 'process of constant reflection' is how one professional described the self-evaluation process in the centre and this is visible in the centre's action plan. The head of centre has a clear understanding of the areas in need of development and that some areas of work, such as that with teenage parents, breastfeeding and fathers need further work. She has been hindered in her work as a strategic manager by the absence of a deputy head of centre, which has resulted in her having a strategic and operational management role for this and two other children's centres in the locality. This has impacted on the work the head of centre has been able to do to refine and track data relating to service users and evaluate the impact the centre has had on improving outcomes for those families. Consequently, the data held and targets set for the centre to achieve are not as sharp as they need to be to help the centre demonstrate and build on any success.

There are clear lines of responsibility within the staffing of the centre and in decision making processes. Supervision and clinical support is given to staff by relevantly qualified managers ensuring that their professional development and knowledge is current. The local authority lead officer for the north area is responsible for performance management of the head of centre. The strategic management and

development of the centre is the responsibility of the head of centre, with good local support and adequate challenge from the children’s centre advisory board.

There is a commitment to promoting equality and diversity within the centre and this is reflected in displays and resources. Some ‘inroads’ have been made into working with Traveller and Polish families, but these are not always robustly followed up. Work to break down barriers and promote integration within the immediate community is not strong but is developing through the work with partners, such as Bolton at Home and the United Reformed Church. It is a source of disappointment to some in the community that there is not a greater cultural mix of families using the centre. It is particularly apparent that the number of families of children with special educational needs and/or disabilities who access the centre is low and this is affected by the strong focus on meeting health needs and by the system of referral to specialist groups outside the area.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day to day management arrangements are clear and understood	2
The extent to which ambitious targets drive improvement, provision is integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community	3
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of users and the wider community	3
The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties	3
The effectiveness of the centre’s policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults	2
The extent to which evaluation is used to shape and improve services and activities	2
The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services the centre has been commissioned to provide	2
The extent to which the centre supports and encourages the wider community to engage with services and uses their views to develop the range of provision	3

Any other information used to inform the judgements made during this inspection

None.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Tonge children's centre on 15 and 16 September 2010. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

We found that the centre provides a very safe and welcoming environment for families to seek and receive good quality care, guidance and support. Many of the agencies that work with young children and their families are based at the children's centre. Their staff are well skilled at recognising when a family is in need of help and they quickly meet with each other to plan and provide individual programmes of support to help those families through their difficulties. This work is making a positive difference to the families who receive it. Some families and groups from the community, such as teenage parents and families of children with special educational needs or disabilities do not use the centre as often as other families. This means that they do not benefit from the advice and support that is available to them, or from the opportunities to get to know different groups of people and how they live. We have asked the children's centre to look at ways that they can help all members of the community to visit and use the services on offer.

The centre is working hard to improve how well the children speak and listen when they start school and the information they have is that this is getting better. However, it is not clear whether the children who have improved are the ones that have been using the children's centre with their parents. We have asked the head of centre to find a better way of knowing if the work they are doing at the children's centre is helping the children and their families to be healthier, safer and improve their learning and social skills.

We saw that the parents and children who go to sessions at the centre enjoy them and that they help them to be active and become better parents. However, we know that opportunities, such as those available to learn about healthy eating, are not offered regularly enough to help people to learn more. We know that because of work the centre has done more new mothers are starting to breastfeed their babies, however, not enough of them continue to breastfeed until their babies are six to eight weeks old.

We found that the head of centre is good at asking all those who work in or use the centre what they like about the centre and what they think could be done better. We found, though, that when the head of centre has this information she has not had the time to use it to set clear targets to aim for to make the centre even better than it is now. This is because she has not had a deputy head of centre to manage the centre on a day to day basis.

The full report is available from your centre or on our website www.ofsted.gov.uk.