

Inspection report for Hilltop Children's Centre

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Linked school if applicable	N/A
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	N/A

The inspection of this Sure Start children's centre was carried out under Part 3A of the Childcare Act 2006 as inserted by section 199 of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009.

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Introduction

The inspection addresses the centre's contribution to:

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

An inspection of the co-located primary school was carried out at the same time as the inspection of the centre under section 5 of the Education Act 2005. The report of this inspection is available on our website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This inspection was carried out by one additional inspector and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the centre manager, the service manager for the locality team, a range of children's centre partners, health professionals, volunteers, and front line staff. The inspectors met parents and carers, observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

Hilltop Children's Centre is located in the Forest of Dean, a rural area to the west of Gloucester. The centre serves a small town and a number of isolated villages, with primarily a long-established White British indigenous population. Much of the area is economically deprived, with pockets of high deprivation. A mix of social and private housing is served by the centre. There are low levels of homelessness. Against national criteria, there is moderate child poverty and increasing numbers of families are in receipt of unemployment benefits. Children's levels on entry to the Early Years Foundation Stage are generally below that found nationally.

The centre provides education and play programmes for children, courses for parents and carers, home visiting, and a range of on-site and outreach support and health services. Within the Hilltop reach area there are about 850 targeted children under five years of age. The centre shares a site with Forest View Primary School. Hilltop Children's Centre has been managed by Gloucestershire Local Authority since November 2010, and was designated as a phase 2 centre in September 2008, building on well-established services for local families.

Inspection judgements

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

Overall effectiveness

The effectiveness of the children’s centre in meeting the needs of and improving outcomes for families

3

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

3

Main findings

Hilltop Children’s Centre is satisfactory overall and demonstrates satisfactory capacity for sustained improvement. The centre actively promotes equality and diversity through its programmes of on-site and outreach work. Following a period of transition in which the governance of the centre by the co-located school passed to the local authority, the experienced centre manager has established effective day-to-day management systems against the background of a reduced budget. She is currently without a senior management team but has a strong understanding of the local communities and of the target groups the centre serves. Self-evaluation procedures are adequate. There has not been a sufficiently detailed analysis of the data and impact of current services in order to plan effectively and coherently for the future.

Some aspects of the centre’s work are of good quality and actively promote strong health outcomes. Safeguarding procedures are well established, and parents comment on how safe and secure they feel in the centre with their babies and children. The centre staff listen well in everyday conversations with families, and have a deep understanding of early years education and of the needs of many local families. Some of the outreach work focused on vulnerable families is a real strength of provision. The centre itself is spacious and accessible, well equipped, and provides a welcoming environment from the moment parents and carers enter.

The centre provides courses, on-site and in the villages, which have proved popular with users, particularly in language enrichment and health promotion. The Forest School programme is excellent. The centre has been successful in encouraging a small number of volunteers to take initiatives in running aspects of the centre, for example the attractive kitchen and café area. A Befrienders Group has also been established successfully by volunteers. The increased self-esteem and confidence of a number of users has been one of the significant successes of the centre’s recent work. In the words of one parent, ‘I was very nervous when I came here first. The staff have really given me confidence and I talk freely now with staff and other parents.’

The centre provides strong early years education and links with Forest View Primary School are effective, summed up neatly by one mother as 'a pre-birth to five school'. The centre also enjoys a variety of productive links with local partners, which have a particular impact on users in tackling mental health and domestic abuse. Parents and carers in discussion and in surveys are positive about their own experiences with the centre. 'I met a wonderful, inspiring tutor who helped me realise that I had value and my dreams were worth dreaming.'

The reflective and determined approach of the centre leader, alongside the staff's willingness to cover for vacant posts, underpins recent achievements and progress. However, there are some families in the reach area who do not readily access its satisfactory and improving provision. There is not a shared understanding amongst all staff of which target groups can be more specifically provided for in the centre's outreach programmes. Similarly, the emerging partnership board does not hold the centre manager to account rigorously, nor is its composition enabling true representation of the diverse reach area.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Collect and analyse relevant data in order to have an improved understanding of the impact of current activities within the centre and in the outreach area.
- Develop the capacity of the staff and senior management team to focus on monitoring current provision and outcomes for users, and identify carefully the specific needs of identified target groups.
- Strengthen the role of the partnership board in order to hold managers to account and to improve community representation in the governance of the centre.

How good are outcomes for families?

3

Outcomes for children and families are satisfactory overall. The centre has identified mental health and domestic abuse as priority areas to address through courses such as the well-attended Freedom Programme. This has proved invaluable to users, with one parent writing, 'I am not a victim of domestic abuse but a survivor, and the staff helped me become that survivor.' Certain courses have had a decisive impact on smoking cessation and increasing breastfeeding, and for women at transition into motherhood. The centre has a dedicated open office area, with good information technology access, which is successful in signposting users to such agencies as the Citizens Advice Bureau and the Gloucestershire Family Information Service Directory. Parents comment that support through these agencies with debt, housing benefits and tenancy issues has been highly supportive at times of stress.

Keeping children safe lies at the heart of the centre's work across the reach area. Staff role model best practices and parents are able to reflect carefully on different

aspects of keeping themselves and their families safe. One user with a significant medical condition had asked staff for help, and alarms and panic buttons had been installed promptly in her house. Those children subject to Common Assessment Framework processes and Child Protection Plans are appropriately monitored by the centre manager, who has significant experience in these important aspects of child protection.

Every Child A Talker, Come and Play, Two on the Go, Moving On, and Dads' Stay and Play have, in their different ways, contributed much to easing young children into school and to the development of their independence and enquiry skills. One parent said, 'The encouragement from the centre for me and my daughter is something I've told all my friends about.' A couple of parents discussed the way in which the spacious centre allows their children to enjoy messy play, 'Something we don't have room for at home.'

The centre is committed to working with new and long-standing users to shape current and future provision. A parent focus group reviews what has been happening at the centre, with many favourable comments such as, 'The centre has been a bolt hole and place of safety – goodness knows if I hadn't had this place.' Your Centre Your Say is a useful monthly gathering. The staff have not built on the users' evaluations with adequate rigour to identify the current and future specific needs of some hard-to-reach groups.

Information and guidance which signpost job opportunities and access to employment are available in the centre, but this is a relatively under-developed area, and one mother commented that she felt that 'most of the jobs were just for men'. A few parents have been supported in finding suitable employment, although insufficient profile is given in the centre to promoting further and continuing education.

These are the grades for the outcomes for users

The extent to which children, including those from target groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles	2
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 children and parents, including those from target groups, 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 parents, including those from target groups, contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	3
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents, including those from target groups, are developing economic stability and independence including access to training and employment	3

How good is the provision?

3

The provision for families and their children is satisfactory overall. The centre enjoys success in identifying the needs of children, especially those with special needs, parents and other users, and has a generally secure understanding of those who attend the centre. Outreach work and home visiting contribute to this appreciation of users' health and social needs. This is complemented by the work of other partners, such as midwifery services, speech and language therapists and oral health promotion teams. However, as the centre's self-evaluation documents highlight, there are potential users whose needs have not been fully assessed. The manager's plans for the centre to be more outward facing and tailored to the hard to reach are well judged and timely.

Parents comment that a number of courses have contributed to their own personal development, improving parenting skills and giving confidence which may lead to future employment. The Positive Parenting Programme is frequently cited by mothers.

The quality and range of services offered are adequate, but the centre has not been sufficiently ambitious to broaden its offer, including courses with qualifications, based on a deeper analysis of needs. The activities which the centre organises are often well supported, with over 30 parents and babies attending the Baby Clinic during the inspection. Mums and dads greatly value the way in which staff afford private space to discuss personal issues relating to babies. One parent observed, 'It's personal here. At the other setting it was one big room – here it's confidential.' The provision of inclusive and well-run crèche facilities is valued by parents, and pushchairs are stored safely when not in use.

A small number of users have turned to the children's centre in times of crisis and have been met with highly individualised interventions. Families comment favourably on the care and support they receive and signposting to a range of other providers is effective. The trust placed in the centre by its users offers a significant platform upon which to build a service which is beginning to reach new target groups. In the words of one parent, 'They used to come and visit me at home. Now I come here because I know I'll be looked after.'

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	3
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups	3
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups	3

How effective are the leadership and management?

3

The way in which the centre is led and managed is satisfactory overall. The effectiveness of safeguarding is good. Day-to-day management of the centre by all staff is conducted with open and warm relationships. Staff's responsibilities across the reach area are understood, and performance management systems are in place. Team meetings are minuted and indicate that some of the important challenges facing the centre are being addressed. Arrangements for governance are less embedded, although target setting and sharper self-evaluation are emerging. The board has yet to play a significant role in bringing together different community voices who can help identify those families in the reach area who do not currently engage with the centre.

Resources are well used by families, for example the outdoor and indoor play equipment and some of the books and toys when they are made available. Posters and photographs throughout the building celebrate what children and parents have achieved together – Forest School and Young at Art are current highlights – and efforts have been made to reflect cultural diversity. Equality of opportunity is promoted well, with the language needs of new arrivals to the country being sensitively handled.

The centre correctly places safeguarding, in the widest sense, at the heart of its work with families. Criminal Records Bureau and recruitment procedures and checks are taken seriously. Multi-agency working is effective and embedded in the locality. The centre is pro-active and collaborates effectively with social services and other key agencies to reduce risks of harm to children and adults alike, for example making speedy referrals, out of office hours, in the case of identified domestic violence. Access for users with disabilities is good, as are toilet and nappy-changing facilities. The centre has not yet succeeded in attracting to its provision some of the most vulnerable adults, including those with disabilities.

The centre collects generally accurate data of attendance at its activities throughout the year, and staff examine these sheets at intervals. Anomalies exist, such as members of the dads' group being registered under the names of their partners. Not enough probing analysis takes place consistently to evaluate the impact of courses, and whether particular target groups are being provided with appropriate support and intervention. Successful integrated delivery of the centre's programme of activities is at an early stage of development.

Service level agreements are in place and the voluntary and private sectors play a meaningful role in overall provision. The centre offers satisfactory value for money because its current users engage positively, with many having gained significantly from its well-planned activities. The manager's lead priority is rightly to establish a deeper level of engagement with the centre's target groups.

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	3
The effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secure improvement in outcomes	3
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	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 partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services provided by the centre to meet its core purpose	3
The extent to which the centre supports and encourages families in the reach area 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 Hilltop Children's Centre on 13 and 14 September 2011. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

The centre occupies an attractive site and is both spacious and well resourced. We spoke to a number of families during our two days at the centre, and all families spoke positively about what the centre offers to them and their children, particularly the support with babies and with family health issues. For some of you, this support has been over many years with your children.

Many of you told us that the centre continues to be an important place in your lives and that of your children, and that you value the work of the staff and volunteers. The work the staff do out in the community, visiting homes, is particularly welcomed by families. A number of users over the years have been helped skilfully by centre staff when experiencing particular crises in their lives. Parents obviously receive expert advice with a wide range of child development matters. Every Child A Talker is a course much mentioned by parents.

Many parents spoke of the trust they place in the centre and how it is always safe and welcoming and 'nothing is too much trouble'. There are a number of popular courses such as Forest School, the Freedom Programme and Baby Group. The centre staff need to analyse with you just how useful these courses are so they can build on these successes for the future.

The centre has some attractive core activities taken up by a relatively small number of families. The centre now needs, with your help, to promote its services to the many families – mums and dads and grandparents – with young children who do not currently attend activities. We have also asked those with responsibility for governing the centre to set down clear priorities and ambitions for the future development of the centre, including expanding outreach work. They then need to review achievements at regular intervals, with a focus on hard-to-reach users.

Thank you to everyone who shared their time and thoughts with us during the inspection days. We hope you will continue to enjoy the benefits of what the centre is offering to local families.

Yours sincerely

Roy Blatchford
Lead inspector

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