

Inspection report for Birchington and Villages Children's Centre

Local authority	Kent
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Centre leader	Emma Fairbairns
Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
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Linked school, if applicable	Not applicable
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Birchington Children's Centre Crèche

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 and carers, prospective parents and carers and young children
- maximising the benefit of those services to parents and carers, prospective parents and carers 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 an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the acting centre leader, other members of staff, key partners, representatives of the local authority, the advisory board and groups of parents and carers.

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

Information about the centre

The centre provides services and activities in Birchington and neighbouring villages. It was designated as a phase two centre in March 2008, opened officially in February 2009, and provides health and family support services, adult training, and early years advice and guidance. The centre is open 48 weeks a year for eight hours a day and is led currently by an acting manager. The staff team works across both Birchington and Garlinge Children's Centres. Services are also provided at a variety of other locations in the area. The centre is part of the Thanet cluster of children's centres and the cluster is governed on behalf of the local authority by Thanet Advisory Board.

The centre serves a predominantly rural area with pockets of economic deprivation. Overall, 21% of children aged from birth to four live in workless households. Most families are White British with small numbers from various minority ethnic groups. Children enter the Early Years Foundation Stage with skills and knowledge at generally below national levels. There is a 10-place on-site crèche facility provided in partnership with Thanet Early Years Project. The crèche was not part of this inspection.

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

Overall effectiveness of the centre is satisfactory. Recent action has dramatically improved the proportion of families in the immediate area being involved. However, the rural nature of the reach area means that there are significant challenges in involving families from further afield. This is a current focus for improvement and centre staff are making stronger links with the villages.

The centre is a warm, safe and welcoming place. Systems for safeguarding, child protection and health and safety are rigorous and underpinned by a strong emphasis on establishing safe routines, openness and mutual respect. The care, guidance and support the centre offers, particularly to the most vulnerable, are also good. As a result, families feel safe and relaxed. They comment on how the centre provides opportunities for them to support each other, build friendships and confidence.

Staff provide high quality activities in the centre, such as courses, parent and toddler groups and crèches. They also provide enjoyable activities which take place in other venues such as village halls and the neighbouring school. Active sessions, for example weekly walks and 'Sporty Tots' have been provided in response to a sharp rise in child obesity. Parents who took part in the 'Mind, Exercise, Nutrition, Do it' (MEND) course comment on how this has had a positive impact on their diet and that of their children. These activities are enhanced by effective partnerships with other children's centres and health visitors. The centre provides a good range of information and the staff are knowledgeable about how to help individual families access specific support elsewhere.

Initially the centre provided activities which were generally rather than specifically targeted to address identified needs. As a greater proportion of families become involved, the centre is more able to identify trends and needs. The centre clearly has a positive impact in some areas, for example the percentage of babies being breastfed is rising due to the good support mothers receive. However, in other areas the evidence of improving outcomes is less secure. Children's achievement in the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile is improving but the gap between the highest and lowest achievement is widening. Some analysis has taken place to identify key

areas for improvement and action taken. However, the impact of activities and support has not been evaluated in terms of whether they are resulting in improving outcomes. For example, children’s progress is not routinely assessed or tracked against the Early years Foundation Stage Profile to identify individual needs or achievements.

Parents speak positively about the services provided by the centre and their experience of the support offered. They are encouraged to give their views on activities and parents are rightly confident that their wishes will be considered. The parents’ forum is fully operational and successful in fund raising and organising additional activities. However, although parents attend the Advisory Board and Steering Group meetings, these do not provide them with sufficient opportunities to contribute to decision making or to shape provision.

Leadership and management are satisfactory. Evaluation is not sharply enough focused on identified needs, nor are activities assessed in terms of whether they are resulting in improved outcomes. Nonetheless, the staff team is talented, knowledgeable and provides a good range of valued activities. Recent action has been more sharply focused, a much higher proportion of families are involved and developing links with the villages are beginning to reach more families in the rural areas. As a result the centre has satisfactory capacity to improve.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Ensure that improvement planning is based on rigorous self-evaluation and identifies clear targets with measurable success criteria.
- Ensure leaders and managers at all levels more closely monitor the impact of services on improving outcomes for all vulnerable groups.
- Develop processes to enable increased user involvement in the decision making and governance of the centre.
- Improve the assessment of children’s learning and development and ensure that it is securely linked to the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile, so that the gap between the lowest achieving 20% and their peers narrows.

How good are outcomes for families?

3

Children get along well together, play safely and enjoy the well-planned activities on offer in the various groups. Their parents also enjoy the opportunities to meet socially, find out about the different resources on offer and play with their children.

Child obesity levels in the area are below average but the centre has responded to a recent rise by providing regular groups such as weekly village walks. Other activities include keep fit classes for parents. The parents who attend this group comment on an improvement in their fitness. The children relish the variety of healthy snacks that

are provided for all groups. Parents are positive about the support they receive from the volunteer peer breastfeeding counsellor and the home visits by the network coordinator, although they said they wished they had known about the services earlier. Health visitor appointment clinics are held at the centre and these are reasonably well attended, however, staff report that attendance at previous drop-in sessions was much higher. Parents and their babies enjoy the relaxed atmosphere of the baby massage sessions which help to develop good parenting skills and contribute to emotional well-being. Despite the many positive indicators that the health of families who take part in these activities is improving, the centre has not evaluated whether a large majority of parents in the area are engaging well with health services, nor have they analysed whether this is resulting in improved outcomes.

Children and adults feel safe and behave safely in the centre and in sessions. There is good role modelling by staff, and safe routines and practices in all groups. In the Forest School sessions, fathers and children learn to assess the risks involved in potentially hazardous activities, such as making fires, and enjoy the activities safely. Emergency hospital admissions in the area fell sharply in 2008/9 but rose in 2009/10 so the centre has offered health and safety home visits to assess hazards, make suggestions and signpost the safety equipment which is available. Visits have been carried out but no follow-up has happened to see whether advice has been taken. Children with a protection plan and those who are subject to the Common Assessment Framework are supported securely. There is good evidence of vulnerable families becoming engaged and supported so that their level of need is reduced and children safer as a result.

All staff are trained in the Early Years Foundation Stage principles and there are displays to support the understanding of parents. The various groups, for example 'Parents and Toddlers', provide a good range of enjoyable activities for children to play inside and out. Parents are also supported to help their children learn and develop. The centre's book library is well supported. Children and parents are fully engaged and all take part in the lively music and 'Sporty Tots' sessions. However, opportunities are missed to develop speaking, listening and communication skills and these are skills identified by the centre as particular weaknesses.

Children learn to share and take turns in groups and get on well together. Parents develop friendships and show mutual respect. Parenting courses develop parents' understanding of how to manage children's behaviour in appropriate ways and avoid confrontation. One parent said of the 'All About Boys' course, 'I thought he was being naughty' but the course had helped her to understand and manage his behaviour better. Feedback from the various courses is positive with most parents saying that they have a greater understanding as a result of attending.

There are regular and varied strategies for consulting with parents and gaining their views. The parents' forum successfully encourages local businesses to contribute, for example, by donating raffle prizes and also raises money for charities. Members of the forum regularly attend the steering and advisory board. Involvement with the

centre activities has a very positive impact on some parents' ability to engage with others and make an increasingly strong personal contribution. One parent commented that as a result of her involvement with the centre she is now an enthusiastic participant, trained volunteer and currently applying for jobs.

Parents participate and develop skills and confidence in a range of courses such as baby signing, cake decoration, first aid and numeracy. Participation is high although several parents attend multiple courses. The centre has helped a number of families to access childcare through the Free for 2 scheme and provides guidance and information on aspects such as adult learning opportunities.

These are the grades for the outcomes for families

The extent to which children, including those from target 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 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	2
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?

2

The centre provides a stimulating environment which promotes learning well. There is good teamwork between the adults to ensure smooth systems and clear organisation. Facilities are good with an interesting range of equipment. In addition, the centre provides activities in other locations including the nearby beach, and this means that resources and provision are extended. There are good quality, well-planned activities for the different age groups and to address different interests. For example, the Forest School involves fathers and, as a result, a relatively high number of fathers are registered with the centre. Most group activities are clearly based on Early Years Foundation Stage principles and there is a useful and regular feature in newsletters which provides ideas of activities for parents to try at home. The range of adult learning opportunities is good as is the provision of courses for parents to explore aspects of child development and parenting.

Well-established links with other agencies, for example health visitors and social workers, contribute to well-integrated provision for the most vulnerable families. There are also good working relationships with the other children's centres in the area to enable families to access support elsewhere. For example, teenage parents

access specialised provision at a nearby centre. Expertise is shared and communication systems are good. Community involvement workers and the qualified teacher are knowledgeable and provide appropriate support and guidance to address specific needs. For example, one community worker trained in British sign language in order to provide better support for hearing impaired parents and children. Places are reserved on courses to ensure that they are available for parents with particular needs. Staff are trained in aspects such as debt management and there are strong links with Job Centre plus, particularly the Lone parent advisor.

The quality and range of services are satisfactory. Currently, 62% of families are registered, however, this overall figure disguises differences across the reach area. Well over 80% of families are registered in the areas of highest deprivation. In the other areas, involvement is very variable and fairly low in some. As the number of families involved increases, support is becoming more sharply focused on identified need but this is at a relatively early stage.

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	2
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups	2

How effective are the leadership and management?

3

At centre level there are very clear designated roles and responsibilities. The staff are well trained and offer training and support to each other. At a strategic level there is also a clear management structure and there is a good range of agencies and parents involved in both the Steering Group and Advisory Board. The Advisory Board offers challenge, however data and other information are not incisively analysed at board or centre level to identify trends and pinpoint targets for improvement. Targets for improvement are not generally measurable or specifically related to outcomes, neither is the means to evaluate impact clear. The centre is increasing the proportion of families involved in the centre, however, there remain areas where the number accessing services and support is still too small. Despite this, key priorities are identified and there is evidence of a rapid improvement in the numbers of families accessing the centre, particularly in the most deprived wards, and evidence of most outcomes improving.

The centre encourages respect for diversity. Staff are alert to addressing issues of inclusion and when appropriate, guide families to a range of specialised services, for example a sensory room for disabled children located in another centre. The needs of fathers are considered, for example, activities take place at the weekends to

encourage their participation. Rural families are rightly seen as a group which is currently not included as much as possible and the centre is working to reduce the barriers to their involvement.

Safeguarding systems are comprehensive and implemented well so that everyone is aware of their own and other's responsibilities. Links with social service colleagues and school family liaison officers mean that the centre is alert to, and responds quickly to, any child protection or safeguarding issues.

The centre is well used and financial oversight is sound. Good partnerships with other children's centres ensures that expertise and facilities are shared, making them more cost effective. The centre has established a range of effective partnerships with a variety of agencies and voluntary and private groups so that a range of high quality services and support is available. As a result, the parents who are involved are positive about the centre and the difference it makes to their lives.

Families whose circumstances make them vulnerable are effectively supported through a coordinated approach. The relationships with some key partners are good, for example, the community nursery nurse runs a baby massage group. Partnerships with midwives, although positive, have been less effective in the past but the imminent location of the midwife service in the centre indicates that they are improving rapidly. Capacity for sustained improvement is satisfactory.

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 the Birchington and Villages Children's Centre on 7 and 8 March 2012. We judged the centre as satisfactory. Thank you for contributing to this inspection. Those of you we spoke to and the examples of feedback we looked at gave us very valuable information about the work and impact of the centre.

The overall effectiveness of the centre is satisfactory with some aspects that are good. All the comments we heard and saw in feedback from parents were very positive and this is, to a great extent, because of the good care, guidance and support the centre offers to its families, particular those most in need, and the rigorous systems which make sure children and families are safe. The centre is a warm, safe and welcoming place where parents and their children benefit from the good quality activities on offer. Those of you who met with us told us how important the centre was in giving you opportunities to build friendships and develop confidence.

Centre staff are aware that, in the past, they have not involved enough families and they are working hard to change that. As a result, more families are able to benefit from the services. There is still some way to go to involve more people in the villages but sessions such as the Minster walks and the enjoyable music workshops in Manston village hall will help.

It is difficult to evaluate exactly what impact the centre's work is having on improving outcomes because, at the moment, information and data are not gathered or analysed in a way that would give that information. What is clear though is that those of you who attend the sessions such as the MEND course believe that what you learned improved your family's diet. Those of you involved in the 'All About Boys' course and the Solihull approach sessions told us that these helped you understand your children better and gave you some good strategies to use with them. You also told us, and the data bear this out, that the breastfeeding support is very positive. However, in other areas the evidence of improvement is not as good. For example, children's achievement in the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile is just below average and the gap between the highest and lowest achievers is widening. Although we agree that the children have a lovely time in the groups, exploring interesting activities inside and outside, we think that their individual achievement should be tracked to identify individual needs and achievements.

Centre staff encourage you to give your views on activities and they take serious account of them. They also encourage you to become volunteers or join the parents' forum where you successfully raise funds and organise additional activities such as the visit to Howletts. However, although parents attend the Advisory Board and Steering Group meetings, these do not provide sufficient opportunities to contribute to decision making or to shape provision.

Leadership and management and capacity to improve are satisfactory. In the past, senior leaders, the Advisory Board and the Steering Group have focused too much on activities and not enough on whether these activities are making sufficient difference to enough families and leading to improvements. However, recent action has been more sharply focused. The staff team works closely with a good range of partners, for example health visitors, play group leaders, Job centre plus colleagues and social workers. Together they have a very good range of skills and knowledge and are keen to improve.

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