

Inspection report for Portsdown Children's Centre

Local authority	Portsmouth
Inspection number	362541
Inspection dates	9 – 10 December 2010
Reporting inspector	Roy Blatchford

Centre governance	Portsdown Primary School governing body
Centre leader	Michael Harris
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Centre address	Sundridge Close, Cosham, Portsmouth PO6 3JL
Telephone number	02392 378393
Fax number	02392 372398
Email address	portsdownchildrenscentre@portsmouthcc.gov.uk

Linked school if applicable	Portsdown Primary School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Portsdown Primary School

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.

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 maintained nursery and 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 co-ordinator, the centre manager and governing body, local authority officers, a range of children's centre partners, health professionals and front line staff. They met parents and carers, observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

Portsmouth Children's Centre is located in an urban area on the northern edge of Portsmouth. The reach area includes a further two primary schools and a new purpose-built community centre where activities are held. The locality in which the centre works has a predominantly White British population with small numbers of Asian families. The community is well established with a mix of social and private housing and some population mobility. Against national criteria, much of the reach area is economically deprived, with a third of households having at least one person with a limiting long-term illness. Unemployment rates in parts of the reach area are relatively high. Many children act as carers for their parents.

The centre provides a range of services including education and play programmes for children, courses for parents and carers, home visiting, and support and community-based health services for a variety of users. Within the reach area there are just over 4000 family households and about 850 targeted children under five years of age. The centre has close links with its host primary school. Children enter the Early Years Foundation Stage with skills generally lower than those expected for their age.

Portsmouth Children's Centre is managed by Portsmouth Primary School governing body. It was designated as a phase two children's centre in November 2007, 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 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 overall effectiveness of Portsdown Children’s Centre is satisfactory and improving steadily. All safeguarding regulations are met, and the centre actively promotes equality and diversity through its programme of on-site and outreach work. Following a period of transition, the centre coordinator has put systems in place to meet the needs of users more fully, building the confidence of his staff to work across the main and satellite sites. The centre’s capacity for sustained improvement is satisfactory. The centre manager and coordinator are aware of the issues and challenges in the communities they serve, but there has not been a sufficiently detailed analysis of the impact of current services in order to plan more effectively for the future.

Some aspects of the centre’s work are of good quality and actively promote community cohesion. The project workers have a deep understanding of local families and their needs, and some of their outreach work in support of individual families is a real strength of provision. The centre itself is well resourced and provides a welcoming environment and ‘drop-in’ facility for a number of parents and carers.

The centre provides courses which have proved popular with users, particularly in cooking and healthy eating, and helping mothers with baby and child development matters such as massage and language enrichment. The centre has been successful in encouraging a number of volunteers to take part in these courses and then feel sufficiently confident to run the same courses for other parents, with only light-touch support from project workers. The increased self-esteem and confidence of a number of users has been one of the significant successes of the centre’s work in the past year.

The centre works closely with its host school, and links between the nursery and Early Years Foundation Stage are well established. The centre also enjoys a range of productive links with local partners, which have a particular impact on users in the

areas of health improvement and the provision of play opportunities for children. Centre staff have maximised users' attendance and engagement by being flexible and creative in their timetabling of different courses.

Parents and carers in discussion and in surveys are very positive about their experiences with the centre. In common with the staff, they feel things have moved on significantly over the course of the past year. 'The centre has given me confidence to come out and meet people', said one, while another commented, 'I get ideas here to do at home and it's nice to meet other mums.'

The reflective and determined approach of the centre coordinator, and the willingness of the staff to seek improvements, underpins current progress. The centre's governing body has not to date given necessary focus to self-evaluation, clarifying lines of accountability and leading ambitious strategic planning. Well judged initiatives are rightly in hand to promote more effectively the current services to the wider community. There are many families in the reach area who do not access its satisfactory and improving provision.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Improve self-evaluation, lines of accountability and strategic planning so that all staff have a clear understanding of the centre's priorities and ambitions for the area of north Portsmouth served by the centre.
- Develop systems for evaluating the quality of current courses so that the centre can better demonstrate its impact on users and plan future provision effectively.
- Increase participation and take-up in the reach area by analysing potential users' needs, and by promoting current and new courses more effectively across the satellite sites, particularly to hard-to-reach groups.

How good are outcomes for users?

3

Outcomes for children and families are satisfactory overall. The centre has identified obesity and personal health as a priority area to address through courses such as 'Cooking on a Budget', 'Get Food' and 'Accredited food hygiene Level 2'. These have proved popular with users, with one parent commenting, 'They listen to our suggestions and new health courses have been provided.' The contents of children's lunchboxes have become more nutritious, and certain outreach support for individuals has had an impact on smoking cessation, breastfeeding and for women at

transition into motherhood. The centre is successful in signposting users through a variety of flyers and on-line information, for example with regard to sexual health.

Keeping children safe lies at the heart of the centre’s work across its reach area. The centre coordinator leads well on this aspect of provision, staff role model safe practices, and parents are able to reflect thoughtfully on different aspects of keeping themselves and their families safe, from fire prevention in the home to street safety. Links have been made with the Think Family project and the Home Check agency, and, following discussions with users, plans have been made to invite the local road safety team, and Smoke Free Homes project to the centre. Those children subject to Common Assessment Framework processes are appropriately monitored by the centre coordinator, who has significant experience in these processes.

With an assigned qualified teacher with responsibility for early years, the centre plays its part well in ensuring children are adequately prepared for the challenge of school and developing skills for the future. Notice-boards display expected outcomes for the Early Years Foundation Stage. Weekly messy play sessions successfully encourage parents to engage in activities with their children which they may be reluctant to try at home to promote enjoyment through learning. Other regular courses, valued by parents, which promote parenting skills and child development, particularly speech and language, include ‘Boogie Mites’ and ‘Come and Sing’. Parents commented on the way their own enhanced parenting skills led to positive behaviours from their children.

The centre is committed to working with users to shape current and future provision. A friendly family meeting takes place once a month to review what has been happening at the centre, with a meeting during the inspection discussing adult learning for the following term and how children’s centres in the area can be advertised more effectively. Some of the centre’s volunteers have direct involvement with the governance of the centre and are involved in current planning for the new Highbury centre.

Information and guidance which signposts job opportunities and access to employment is available in the centre, but this is relatively under-developed, and plans have been made to raise the profile of Jobcentre Plus across the reach area. Some parents have been supported in finding suitable employment. As with various outcomes for users, the centre has not yet established robust procedures for recording such successes and analysing what its distinctive part has been in improving outcomes for families.

The extent to which children, including those from vulnerable groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles	3
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The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	3
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 parents are developing economic stability and independence including access to training	3

How good is the provision?

3

The provision for families and their children is consistently satisfactory, and good in some aspects. The centre has had some success in recent years in assessing the needs of children, parents and other users and has a generally good understanding of those who attend one of the centres in the reach area. Project workers' outreach work and home visiting contribute usefully to this understanding of users' health and social needs. This is complemented by the work of others, such as the Community Improvement Partnerships, Pre-School Learning Alliance and health visitors. Current research into the needs of those who access the Highbury centre is proving fruitful in planning future provision. However, this is not an embedded feature of the centre's practice, and a detailed study of the composition of the reach area population highlights that there are many potential users whose needs have not been closely assessed.

A strength of the centre lies in the way it promotes purposeful learning and enjoyment through its programme of courses and activities, albeit to a relatively small number of families. Parents comment repeatedly that a range of courses are well led and contribute significantly to their own personal development, improving their parenting skills and giving confidence which may lead to future employment. 'Cook Eat Freeze' will stimulate purposeful learning about diet and nutrition, a weekly literacy course has immediately led to parents wanting to know how they can help their children make the most out of picture books, and a computer course has whetted the appetite for courses in digital photography and website design. The involvement of volunteers in sustaining courses is a very good feature of the centre's overall provision.

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 more robust analysis of needs. Those activities which the centre organises are generally well supported, with over 40 users attending a lunch during the inspection. The provision of crèche facilities alongside courses is valued by parents. Plans to develop the outdoors areas of the Portsdown and Highbury centres afford the

opportunity to engage with new users, and the main centre and its host school are looking together at ways in which more fathers can be regular visitors to weekend activities. A summer holiday boxing scheme was one innovative project run by the centre to meet hard-to-reach users.

A small number of users have turned to the children’s centre in times of crisis and have been met with very good care and support. Generally, families are pleased with the care and support they receive, and signposting to a range of other providers is effective. The Family Induction Pack provided by the centre to all those who register is accessible and informative, and has key contact points and personnel clearly laid out. The trust placed in the centre by those who are familiar with its work is a recurring theme and is an important foundation upon which the centre can build as it forges greater impact on all potential users. As one parent observed, ‘There are always people I can trust at this centre – staff are friendly and helpful to me and my children.’

The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users	3
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all users	2
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	3

How effective are the leadership and management?

3

The leadership and management of the children’s centre is satisfactory overall; the effectiveness of its safeguarding is good. Day to day management of the centre by the staff is sound, as are the staff’s responsibilities across the reach area, and performance management systems are in place. Regular meetings are in place to review the centre’s work but arrangements for governance and accountability are in need of review to provide a sharper focus on self-evaluation and target setting. The respective responsibilities of the advisory board, governing body and local authority require clarification. Currently the centre has appropriate expectations of those who take part in its activities, but these are not as high as they need to be if hard-to-reach users are to be brought into the centre’s orbit.

Resources are well used by families, for example the cooking and play equipment, and current development work to create an exciting outdoors area is being well led. Similarly, plans for the use of the new Highbury site are well judged and have significant potential to impact on new users. The Medina site is similarly harnessed to good effect.

Throughout its work with users the centre places appropriate emphasis on promoting equality, although more needs to be done to involve fathers. Posters and photographs in corridors and in working rooms celebrate diversity, for example a current display on festivals of light from Divali to Christmas. The centre places safeguarding at the heart of its work with users, and all staff and families take the subject of keeping children safe very seriously. Criminal Records Bureau procedures and checks are robust. The centre is pro-active and collaborates effectively with other key agencies to reduce the risk of harm to children and adults alike, for example making speedy referrals 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 accurate data of attendance at its activities throughout the year and staff examine these spreadsheets at intervals. However, not enough analysis has taken place on a regular basis to evaluate the impact of courses and outreach work. Once this is done, the centre will be a better position to demonstrate its current impact and to focus appropriate future priorities. This will be particularly important with the forthcoming opening of the Highbury satellite site; door-to-door questionnaires are currently being conducted in this area to help shape future provision.

The centre engages effectively with a well chosen range of partners, from Community Improvement Partnerships and the Pre-School Learning Alliance to the Portsmouth breast feeding team and health improvement workers. Service level agreements across the city are also securely in place, for example with Solent Healthcare and the speech and language therapy service, further enriching provision and promoting emotional health and well-being.

The centre offers satisfactory value for money because its users engage positively and have gained significantly from its well planned activities, outreach and signposting. Widening the impact across the reach area is a challenge that the centre has not yet achieved.

The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day to day management arrangements are clear and understood	3
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	3
The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services the centre has been commissioned to provide	3
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 complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance 'Complaining about inspections', which is available from our website: www.ofsted.gov.uk. If you would like us to send you a copy of the guidance, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

Summary for centre users

We inspected the Portsdown Children's Centre on 9 and 10 December 2010. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

Those of you who spoke to us told us that your centre is improving steadily under the careful guidance of the centre co-ordinator and continues to benefit from a dedicated team of project workers. The work they do out in the community with individual families is greatly valued.

Time and again parents we met mentioned how much they trust the centre and that it always provides a warm and welcoming place to meet and take courses. Activities such as Little Nippers and Adult Craft which we were able to sit in on during our inspection provide good quality support and learning. There are others such as baby signing, baby massage, breast feeding and 'Shake Rattle and Make' which parents told us they enjoyed and helped support bringing up their babies and young children. The centre staff need to analyse with you just how useful these courses are so they can create more and different courses for the future.

Another distinctive feature of the centre is the way in which volunteers help the project staff run various activities. This helps sustain the centre's work, both at Portsdown and at the local satellite sites. The centre is also flexible in timetabling activities and this encourages users' attendance, as does providing a crèche for those parents who need one. Links with the primary school have developed well since the centre was started, and activities based in Medina and Highbury are also appreciated by families.

The centre has some attractive core activities for a quite a small group of families. The centre now needs, with your help, to promote its services to the many families with young children who do not currently attend activities, including attracting more fathers into the centre.

We have also asked those who have responsibility for the governance of the centre to set down clear priorities and ambitions for the future growth of the centre, including developments at the satellite sites. They then need to review achievements at regular intervals with a focus on hard-to-reach users.

Thank you to those who found time to meet with us during the inspection days, and we hope you will continue to enjoy the benefits of what the centre is offering to local families.

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