

Inspection report for Higher Croft Children's Centre

Local authority	Blackburn with Darwen
Inspection number	367812
Inspection dates	18-19 May 2011
Reporting inspector	Elaine Clinton HMI

Centre governance	Local authority
Centre leader	Maria Nugent
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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Linked school if applicable	Not applicable
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	EY268694 Higher Croft Children's Centre full day care and 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.

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 registered early years/childcare provision was carried out at the same time as the inspection of the centre under section 3 of the Childcare Act 2006. The report of this inspection is available on our website www.ofsted.gov.uk.

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and one early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the early years geographical managers, representatives of the local management board, local authority officers, health and social care professionals, Early Years Foundation Stage staff, users of the centre and partner agency representatives. They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

Higher Croft Children's Centre opened in 1988 as a Social Services Family Centre. It became a phase one children's centre in 2004 providing the full core offer. The early years geographical manager leads the services provided by the centre and coordinates those provided by its partners. The operational manager manages the day-to-day running of the centre. At the time of the inspection, the early years geographical manager had been in post six days, and the operational manager had been in post two days. The local authority and health services in Blackburn with Darwen had just completed a review and rationalisation of services across the authority. The centre works closely with the other children's centres across the local authority.

The centre provides a base for a range of services including health, childminders, Jobcentre Plus and the Credit Union. It serves a community that is in one of the 30% most deprived wards in the country. Unemployment is high in many parts of the reach area and most of the available jobs are low paid. Over one fifth of the working age population are claiming out of work benefits. Some 88.4% of the population are

described as having low, or no qualifications, nearly 10% higher than the England average, and just above the local authority average. Evidence indicates that the skills and knowledge with which children enter nursery are well below those expected for their age. The majority of the families living in the reach population are of White British heritage with a small but growing Asian and Eastern European community.

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

Overall effectiveness of the centre is satisfactory with many aspects that are good. The commitment shown by all staff to helping families in times of crisis is good and the centre’s assessment of children’s needs is particularly good. This makes a significant contribution towards improving the outcomes for children and families. Highly targeted outreach support and good multi-agency working is ensuring the centre can support the most needy and vulnerable children. The Common Assessment Framework (CAF) is used particularly well to ensure that the needs of families are carefully assessed and met. As a consequence of the very effective and targeted support, the numbers of referrals are increasing. This, and the impact of rationalising services means that a few families in the area whose need is less acute feel that they do not always receive the range of services and support they may need to help them improve their family’s life chances.

The centre is a warm and friendly place to attend. It is a particularly inclusive centre where all are welcome. The reception and café staff make considerable efforts to ensure that all those who come to the centre feel well looked after and cared for. One parent said that ‘she knew that she could always ask the reception and café staff for help and they would provide it willingly, however busy they were’. Another parent talked enthusiastically about the supportive conversation about breastfeeding that had taken place between her husband and a male maintenance worker. Relationships between staff, the community and all of the people who use the centre are very positive, which is helping to promote cohesion. Safeguarding arrangements are satisfactory and users of the centre were unequivocal in their view that they feel safe and welcome at this centre. The centre provides high quality activities for

children and families and overall management is satisfactory.

Support for breastfeeding mothers is a particular strength, facilitated by very good mentor support and a whole-centre and local authority commitment to the promotion of breastfeeding. Many parents talk enthusiastically about the help they have received. All staff in the centre have been trained to ensure that they can provide new parents with support. The centre strenuously promotes breastfeeding in the local community, and all the local shops have posters confirming that they are 'breastfeeding friendly'. Despite this excellent commitment to breastfeeding, the numbers of mothers who are breastfeeding in the area remains low.

Children using the centre, in particular those attending the nursery, are very well prepared for the next stage of their learning. Staff provide activities that are carefully matched to needs and abilities, helping them to make good progress in all aspects of their development. They play well together, sit quietly and attentively during stories and demonstrate good manners when eating snacks and meals.

The centre works well with its partners to meet the needs of this diverse community. It has positive links with the local community action group and the youth club and makes good use of these links to promote and support community cohesion through a range of joint activities, such as festivals and fun days. It works closely with partners in the statutory and voluntary sectors to make best use of resources, although the use of volunteers both in the delivery of services and to provide stepping stones to employment is underdeveloped.

Communication between the local authority, centre staff and service providers is very good and the local authority has provided consistent support to the centre staff during a time of significant change. The local management board is highly effective and has a significant impact on the role and activities that take place in the centre. It provides good support and challenge to centre staff and managers and is a strong and effective vehicle in supporting parents and carers to gain in confidence and skills that help them to make progress in their personal and professional lives. The role of the sub committees is less secure. During recent reorganisations, meetings of some committees have lapsed. Action plans and targets for other committees are not well aligned and because of this it is difficult for the local management board to have a clear picture of the impact of all of the work of the centre. Parents and carers are well represented on the local management board, but are less consistently represented on the supporting sub-committees.

The new early years geographical leader has a good understanding of the strengths in the provision and how the centre could improve. She is extremely well respected by all around her and her drive, passion and determination to ensure the centre is outstanding is already beginning to have an impact on the future direction of the centre. Self-evaluation is not yet supported by systematic analysis. The centre regularly evaluates the quality of provision and uses this information to determine priorities, but success is less well measured. For example, the impact of adult learning on improving employment opportunities and reducing the number of

children living in workless families. This means it is difficult for the centre to rigorously evaluate the impact of its work over time, or make comparisons between the outcomes of different groups of users. Staff are good at listening to the voice of users, whether through evaluations or more formally through questionnaires. Although this information is used well to inform the development of operational services, it is used less well at a strategic level. Current action plans are not detailed enough, or specifically matched to targets to fully support leaders in effectively driving improvement. The local authority provides useful quality assurance advice as well as support and challenge, and recent developments clearly show that the centre is going in the right direction, contributing to the centre's satisfactory capacity to build on these successes in the future and further improve outcomes for children and their families.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Further improve the collection and analysis of data so that it is used more consistently to identify and target key priorities, and demonstrate the improvement in outcomes over time, in particular the impact that learning and development for adults is having on their economic well-being.
- Improve action planning and self-evaluation by ensuring targets are specific and measurable and by making better use of the detailed user evaluations of services.
- Make best use of volunteering to:
 - enable parents develop skills that will support them into employment
 - increase the range of sustainable provision by building the capacity of parents and the local community.

How good are outcomes for users?

2

Evidence from case studies, the centre's own evaluations, and interviews with health professionals and users show the impact that initiatives are having on improving children's and families' health and personal well-being. The regular health drop-in provides parents and carers with good, accessible information on a range of health issues relating to them and their family. The various stay and play sessions make a strong contribution to the emotional and physical health of children and their families. The community café reinforces the centre's focus on healthy eating by providing a good choice of low priced, healthy food. Children with special educational needs and/or disabilities make very good progress and parents and carers are particularly positive about the way that staff and speech and language therapists work together to ensure consistent messages in supporting language development. One parent told inspectors that 'every day when I came to pick my child up from nursery, they were talking more...now I can't stop them talking!' Breastfeeding is particularly well promoted throughout the centre, with parents receiving excellent support from the dedicated breastfeeding mentor. Despite this good work, the

number of mothers initiating and sustaining breast feeding remains below the local and national rates.

Staff model safe practices well and the centre is a safe place to be. Routines and these good role models ensure that parents and carers have an increased awareness of hazards around the home. Parents and children feel safe in the centre because of well established relationships and the knowledge that staff will listen to and understand any parental concerns or difficulties. Early intervention is highly effective in preventing difficulties escalating. Parents who spoke with inspectors had a good understanding of how to keep themselves and their families safe. The centre, working closely with its health partners, uses local hospital data to provide targeted family fun days to raise awareness of the most common accidents affecting young children. A series of events carefully highlighted the main incidents leading to scalds and burns. As a result of this, the numbers of children admitted to hospital with burns and scalds has reduced in the last year.

Observation of the early years provision shows that children are successfully developing skills for the future. The inspection of the day care provision found that children who attend are very well prepared for nursery and mainstream school due to the very effective delivery of the Early Years Foundation Stage. These children are provided with high quality learning experiences that are impacting positively on their learning and development. The centre's clear and detailed tracking information shows that these children make very good progress in their learning. Children are interested and engaged in their environment and confidently initiate learning and try new activities. Parents', carers' and children's enjoyment is evident through the consistently high attendance at drop-in activities and the good take-up of nursery and crèche places. Ideas and activities are shared well with parents, supporting them to help their children to achieve highly. As one parent said, 'I am now really confident to be creative with play at home, I know that water play is more fun than expensive toys'. Those attending sessions, such as 'Play and Learn,' and those involved in the Two Year Old Funding Entitlement Project, are achieving well. Data for 2009/10 confirm that increasing numbers of children attending the nursery are achieving 78 points or more on the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile. However, the centre does not monitor or have an overall record of progress and achievement to enable leaders to identify the progress all children make over time in relation to their starting points.

Children's behaviour is very good as are relationships between adults and children across all settings. Users benefit from the exemplary behaviour displayed by staff. Children and parents and carers sit together to eat, and users of the café are polite and considerate. A number of parents and carers spoken to during the inspection, commented on how their confidence had improved as a result of their participation in activities offered by the centre. 'I now feel much more confident in talking to health and other people in authority....I now feel I am talking to teachers as an equal' are typical of the comments made by users. A visit to a play session provided compelling evidence of young children and their parents bonding well and children developing their play and communication skills. Groups of mothers shared stories and

tips about dealing with increasingly mobile babies and several parents reported that they feel better on days when they have an activity to participate in. Parents and carers say that they feel their voice is generally listened to and acted on.

Close links are well established with Jobcentre Plus ensuring adult users have improved access and information about employment opportunities. This is beginning to have an impact on the numbers of families receiving benefits, although the number of families who remain on benefits and are unemployed remains high. The centre offers courses, from taster courses to level 1 qualifications in literacy and numeracy, aimed at improving confidence and reducing worklessness. Whilst take up of places on the introductory courses is good, the number of parents and carers accessing the Skills for Life courses remains low. The progress and impact that these courses are having on parents and carers is not well recorded, consequently it is difficult for the centre to fully evaluate their impact over time.

The extent to which children, including those from vulnerable 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 users enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	2
The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships and users contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	2
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?

2

The needs of vulnerable families are effectively assessed and support is well organised across agencies. The quality of care for parents and carers and their children is good. Families in crisis or facing particular challenges are well supported. The CAF process is used very effectively to ensure that engagement with relevant agencies is prompt and well matched to identified needs. Parents report that the timeliness and quality of individual support is good, often exceptional, and available for as long as needed. Careful strategies are in place to ensure parents and carers can build their confidence, parenting skills, and be supported to independence, at a pace that is appropriate to them.

Individuals requesting specific help or guidance receive this promptly, resulting in

positive outcomes. This may include attending other centres in the area, including other children’s centres. Support for users’ wellbeing is a high priority and families report that their lives are better for having the specific help they need, particularly at low points in their lives. As one user reported, ‘the four hours a week that my child attended the centre was a lifeline’. In all sessions, staff continually ensure that activities are interesting and relevant to users’ lives. For example, children and parents engage in messy play while staff provide useful ideas on how this activity can be carried out at home in a confined space.

Learning, development and enjoyment are promoted well. Parents and carers, speak highly of the impact that the opportunities provided by the centre have had on them and their children, and evaluations from them about the individual interventions demonstrate the difference their experiences have made to their own and their children’s development and well-being. Personal learning is celebrated well through special events and displays which recognise the successes of users. Parents who are members of the management board or sub-committees develop confidence and make good gains in their careers and family lives.

The centre recognises that there is more to do to ensure that the range of services meets the needs of all in the reach area. In particular it is keen to recommence the one year old birthday parties that were put on hold during the reorganisation of services, as well as support parents to effectively run and manage more drop-in activities. Staff are keen to provide more opportunities for users to be involved in activities that support the development of work-related skills, such as volunteering, and to increase the number of users who gain confidence and qualifications in Skills for Life.

Parenting courses provide useful support and guidance. Childminders are well supported and the centre has developed good links with day care providers in the area. A crèche is available for parents and carers attending courses at the centre. Parents are very positive about the quality of help and encouragement they receive. The Credit Union is highly effective in providing clear information on money management, avoiding debt and saving. One parent said that she ‘saved a few pennies each week that meant she could manage Christmas without borrowing’. Notice boards display useful information, and good quality information and guidance is available in the form of booklets on health care, financial advice and parenting. In addition to this, posters regarding sexual health, contraception and breastfeeding are strategically placed to ensure accessible information on these subjects is available.

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	2
The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities	3

meet the needs of users and the wider community	
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 new early years geographical manager has an excellent understanding of further improvements needed at the centre. She is passionate about moving the centre towards excellence and her passion is a driving force for the future development of the centre. During a period of significant change the early years geographical managers, supported by colleagues across the borough and the local authority, have ensured that the quality of front-line services has remained high. Changes, including relocation and redundancy have been managed sensitively. The flexible deployment of staff and resources and the careful and rigorous reviewing of support are ensuring good value for money.

Governance of the centre is strong and the local authority provides the centre with good, consistent support and challenge through the annual conversation and thorough financial audits. The local management board is very effective, frequently being the catalyst for change and, in the words of the local authority, 'punches well above its weight'. Parental and community representation are at the heart of its success. It was instrumental in the refurbishment of the centre almost three years ago. 'We looked at many other centres, decided what we wanted and made sure they happened. Before the changes not many people came to the centre, now it is so open and accessible that everyone wants to come here'. During the reorganisation of the last seven months, the frequency and regularity of the reporting of some sub-committees has varied, as has the rigour and clarity of actions arising from these meetings. As a result of this, the management board are less well informed of all aspects of the centre's work.

The centre action plan is appropriately detailed, but there are few sharp, measurable targets that link to the data that is available to the centre. This means that progress and priorities are not always as clear as they could be. Projects are carefully evaluated creatively seeking the views of users formally and informally, and are used effectively to make changes in the provision at an operational level. Currently this feedback is not used to its full effect to inform the overall self evaluation of the centre or its future direction.

Safeguarding policies and procedures are in place with all staff, partners and members of the local management board having had appropriate Criminal Record Bureau checks. However, procedures to ensure that the checks relating to partners are current and complete have only very recently been established. A careful risk assessment ensures the safety of all those making use of the community café and other public areas. An integrated approach and sound knowledge of the CAF ensure that services are well targeted. Potentially vulnerable families are identified at an early stage, and careful assessment of their needs is ensuring that they receive high

quality support from very effective family support workers.

Equality and diversity are promoted very effectively, with well established systems in place to identify and tackle any discrimination. Centre users comment on how non-judgmental centre staff are and how, 'it is the most welcoming place to be, we all feel special when we come here.' The centre has invested in a very effective interactive translation tool that is used to integrate users of other languages. Evidence of its effectiveness was seen during the inspection when seven Polish speaking families attended the centre for the first time. Partnerships are strong and very well established. The centre has worked hard to make the centre a place where everyone is welcome. Inspectors saw many different users accessing the centre, including childminders, the local nursery and learners from the nearby training centre.

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	2
The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties	2
The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults	3
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	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

The Ofsted inspection of the day care and crèche that took place on the 16 May 2011 was taken into account in the provision and outcomes judgments.

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 Higher Croft Children's Centre on 18-19 May 2011. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall, with many good features. We visited a number of activities, looked at the centre's plans and documents and had discussions with some of you, your children, members of staff and other professionals who work with the centre.

Throughout the inspection children, their families and other users were keen to tell us how the centre had helped them. We were particularly impressed by the case studies that showed the difference that the centre was making. My colleague really enjoyed speaking to mums and their children who were attending the baby play sessions, indeed she would have been happy to stay with you all day.

The centre has many strengths, including the actions taken to support you and your children's safety and well-being and the good quality of care, guidance and support offered by all staff who work with you and your children. The centre is working closely with many organisations such as schools, health and social care professionals to improve the range of services that are available to you. Using these partnerships it is helping many families and children, to have a good start in life. Parents have given us many examples of how the centre has helped them to gain confidence, improve their budgeting and manage their child's behaviour better.

The centre is very good at helping new mums who choose to breastfeed their babies. We thought that the support from the breastfeeding mentor was really good and we were particularly impressed by the determination of the centre staff to ensure that all shops in your local area support breastfeeding mums. We know you really appreciate the flexibility and information provided about you and your family's health through the regular health drop-ins. The community café is supporting mums and dads to help their children eat healthily.

Parents we spoke to describe the centre as providing a safe and welcoming environment; they are confident that their children will be secure and well cared for. The reception, catering and maintenance staff were particularly praised for their warmth. Many parents explained just how important the centre is in their and

family's lives. They told us that staff listen to them and help them to get the right help and support. We found that the centre was good in helping families at times in their lives when they most need it. The support is provided quickly and professionals and others work closely together to support both families and children. This includes some of you who are fairly new to the country, dads and those of you who have been affected by domestic violence.

Children make good progress in the nursery where there is a wide range of activities. This helps them to be ready for their move to school. The centre makes sure they check whether you have enjoyed any courses or sessions in the centre and they respond by making changes to your comments. However, we think that even better use could be made of your feedback to plan all of the provision at the centre. Those of you who take part in activities such as such as baby rhyme time say how good it is in helping you to understand your children's development, in building your confidence and self-esteem and in helping you to develop good relationships with your babies.

The centre is valued in the local community because of the good work of the local management board in making the centre accessible to everyone. We know that there have been many changes in the last few months at the centre, but we were really impressed that these had not affected the quality of the provision. The new early years geographical manager is passionate about ensuring that the centre provides the best provision possible for you. To do this we have asked her and her team to make sure that she has even better information on the difference that the centre is making in your lives, so that this can be used in planning provision. She and her team want to use this to plan for more activities, to set very clear targets and to ensure that even more people can use the good things that it is providing. We have also asked her to enable more of you to be involved in the centre as a volunteer so that you can gain a range of experiences that will give you better chances to gain employment as well as helping the centre to increase the range of activities it provides.

Thank you to everyone who took the time to speak with us, we are very grateful and wish you every success for the future.

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