

Inspection report for Branches Children's Centre

Local authority	Hampshire
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Reporting inspector	Michael Kubiak HMI

Centre governance	The Local Authority
Centre leader	Ben Calder
Date of previous inspection	This is the centre's first inspection
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Linked school if applicable	Not applicable
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Not applicable

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.

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an early years inspector. The inspectors held meetings with the centre's management team, representatives from the local authority and partner organisations, and with the team of family support outreach workers. They spoke to centre users formally and informally.

They observed the centre's work including the 'Peep Bo' group, a speech and language drop-in session, a 'Boogie Mites' course and a 'Baby Splat' session. These groups were observed at the centre and at community venues. They looked at a range of relevant documentation including the centre's self-evaluation, service delivery plan and quality improvement plan.

Information about the centre

Branches Children's Centre was designated in 2008. It is based within the grounds of Horndean Technology College. It was originally designed to be a 'virtual centre' with no building, however when a building became available it was decided to provide a base and offer some direct services. The centre opens on Tuesdays and Wednesdays only, from 8.30am to 4.30pm. The centre is open all year round. Staff are employed by the local authority and work across Branches Children's Centre and nearby Links Children's Centre. A partnership board is responsible for and oversees the work of both centres.

Services are run within the centre and direct work takes place in families' homes. There are a range of commissioned services offered at community buildings. Users are signposted to Links Children's Centre for some of the services and are encouraged to attend the centre most accessible to them.

The centre's catchment area is mixed in terms of deprivation. There is a mix of rural and urban housing. The local population is mostly White British, with a very small percentage of ethnic minority families, including an increasing population of Eastern European families. The number of children under five living in workless households is

below the national average and is reducing. Children’s levels of attainment on entry to Early Years Foundation Stage provision are slightly below those expected for their age. At the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage around 49% of children achieve at least 78 points across the Early Years Foundation Stage with communication, language and literacy the weaker area.

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

2

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

2

Main findings

Branches Children’s Centre provides good quality services, with some outstanding features. It knows the community well and is extremely welcoming to all users. It offers a friendly, safe and accessible environment. Groups are run within the centre and at various community venues. These groups are well attended and popular with parents and carers. The safeguarding of all who use the centre is a high priority. Risk assessments are undertaken across the centre. Safer recruitment procedures are good. The highly effective outreach work is having a positive impact on improving outcomes for families who receive the service. The outreach team also engages some of the harder to reach families with the centre.

Key strengths of the centre are the care, guidance and support offered to users and the wider community and the way in which the centre works with partner agencies to deliver a cohesive set of services. Services are well co-ordinated and the staff have worked hard to build effective links with a wide range of partner organisations. This is particularly evident in the work of the family support outreach workers and the many examples of joint working. Staff empower parents and carers to make decisions. Case studies demonstrate that the work of the centre is having a significant impact on improving outcomes for users of the centre and that they are more confident and make informed choices. Many centre users spoke very highly of the work of the centre and the benefits they obtained from attending. One parent told inspectors ‘Coming here was the start of getting back on track’. Another parent told inspectors that the centre was ‘Fantastic, absolutely amazing, could not fault it’. In times of crisis parents and carers access the centre for support. Centre staff have been working with health professionals on improving health outcomes for families.

More structured groups, including those around developing parenting skills, are well attended. The volunteer programme provides opportunities for people to work at the centre and build their employability skills.

The leadership and management of the centre are good. The staff work across two centres and the 'Twinning Policy' ensures that resources, including staffing, are effectively spread across the two centres. This also supports the centre's focus on providing excellent value for money. There is good team work and communication between the staff. Staff have a good understanding of the individual needs of the families and this supports them in effectively identifying where to target services. There is a clear commitment to improving outcomes for users within the reach area.

The centre has a strong ethos of self-evaluation and reflection and striving for further improvement. For example the centre has identified specific areas of the community that it needs to engage in its work and specific targets have been set.

Although the centre welcomes all parts of the community this is not promoted and reflected consistently in the resources, literature and displays there. Although the centre has access to translation services, centre information is only available in English. The 'Age and Stage' booklets produced by the centre portray limited sections of the community.

All centre users, partner organisations and staff contribute effectively to the centre's self-evaluation, service delivery plan and quality improvement plan. Data is available at national, local and centre level and is used to assess the work of the centre and to set targets. Although some of these documents lack clarity in some areas, they are effective in shaping the future of the service and bringing about improvement. As a result, the centre's capacity for sustained improvement is good.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Develop further the service delivery and quality improvement plans by:
 - including more targets which are specific and measurable
 - clearly identifying who is leading on each specific area
 - including regular reviewing of targets
- Strengthen equality and diversity across the centre, ensuring that this is more reflective of the wider community, inclusive of all groups, and integral to the centre's work.

How good are outcomes for users?

2

Healthy lifestyles are promoted through information, support and focused activities such as 'Cook and Eat'. The centre continues to provide and promote healthy food choices through the monthly 'Meet and Munch' lunch sessions. Feedback obtained

following these activities is that parents continue to make healthier lifestyle choices. Parents and carers and their children become more active as they take part in activities in the centre's outside areas. The centre is keen to extend the children's opportunities for outdoor physical play through their 'forest school' programme and developing the centre's outside areas.

Children are kept safer in their homes through the support offered by staff at groups at the centre and through outreach work. Related literature is available at the centre and attending annual events such as the 'Beep Beep' day means that parents can learn more about topics such as road and fire safety. Strong partnership working ensures that good support is given to families who are subject to child protection plans or who need extra support, including at times of crisis. This is offered predominantly through the family support outreach workers who work both directly with families in their homes and through groups at the centre. Parents value their input, as one parent commented '10/10 for personal family support'.

Children and their parents and carers play and learn together when they visit the groups which are run at the centre, other centres and local community venues. Parents and carers report that they continue to use what they have learnt at the centre with their children at home. For example they continue sign language with their babies at home even after the course has finished. Their skills as parents and carers are enhanced as they take part in relevant parenting programmes.

The centre teacher has worked with the local school and early years settings in looking at how children's communication skills can be improved through all of their early years experiences.

Parents and carers are well supported in accessing the centre. Those who are less confident receive excellent tailored support. Staff appreciate some of the barriers that users may face and work individually to overcome them. Users report enhanced confidence and self-esteem due to the support and encouragement provided by the centre staff.

The centre is an integral part of the community and relationships with users and staff are positive. One parent commented that the centre had a 'family feel' whilst another parent travels a considerable distance to access support from the centre. Parents and carers appreciate the centre's work. A cycle of evaluation planning and consultation means that parents have regular opportunities to feed back their views. They feel that they are able to express their own ideas for development and that these are acted on. Some parents contribute more formally to the centre's work through being part of the family forum or the partnership board.

These are the grades for the outcomes for users

<p>The extent to which children, including those from vulnerable groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles</p>	<p>2</p>
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The extent to which children are safe and protected, and 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 and employment	2

How good is the provision?

2

The centre provides outstanding care, guidance and support to users of the centre and to families that it works with in the community. Support is individual and tailored to the specific needs of the families. The centre has firmly established procedures for assessing the needs of children and families. These assessments involve a range of professionals and centre staff use their local knowledge to effectively support parents and carers.

The space within the centre, although limited, is well used. The centre has three different outdoor areas and these are seen as integral parts of the centre. There are plans to develop these areas further.

The centre is well established within the local community. In addition to the services run directly from the centre, it commissions and supports a number of other groups within the local community. Centre staff work with volunteers at these local groups to develop their provisions. These promote the children's centre and ensure that the services are reaching as many families as possible. Staff make good use of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) process when children are identified as having a higher level of need. The centre is also a 'CAF Champion' and has a role in encouraging other services to become more engaged in the process.

Outreach services are good and are reaching those identified as most vulnerable. Family support outreach workers undertake an initial assessment before agreeing with the parents or carers on a programme of support. This support is tailored to the family's individual needs and regular reviews are undertaken by the family support outreach workers. Case studies demonstrate the positive effect of the outreach service on improving outcomes for families. Excellent signposting ensures that parents and carers continue to receive appropriate levels of support.

Parents and carers are seen as individuals and treated with respect. The centre has been successful in engaging teenage parents and offering them guidance and advice on topics which are specific to them. This is enhanced through effective multi-agency working, integration of services and good signposting to relevant information and support.

The centre has a comprehensive volunteer scheme. Volunteers receive a thorough induction and are well supported in developing their knowledge and skills. The centre has supported volunteers in accessing accredited training courses and some have been successful in obtaining paid employment. Links with the technology college on site are improving and the centre hopes to run basic numeracy and literacy programmes in partnership with them.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users	2
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all users	2
The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of users and the wider community	2
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to users within the centre and the wider community	1

How effective are the leadership and management?

2

The centre's leaders work effectively as a team and have built purposeful links. Good quality services are matched to individual users' needs. This is enhanced through effective signposting to groups running in the community and to other children's centres. The impact of the work of groups run at the centre and work with individual families is rigorously evaluated through a variety of different methods. These evaluations feed into the centre's vision of constantly improving the services it provides. The 'Twinning Policy' ensures that staff work effectively across the two centres and they are deployed where there is the most need. The policy, alongside the improved outcomes for users, means that the centre provides good value for money.

Data is used by the centre as a way of monitoring and evaluating its services. Regular data reports are provided and these feed into the centre's self-evaluation, service delivery plan and quality improvement plan. The data is used effectively to set targets for improvement, although not consistently across all areas. Baseline data and targets are not specific, and this impacts on the centre's ability to accurately assess their progress. The centre's service delivery and quality improvement plans identify specific targets for staff however these are not individualised sufficiently to identify who has overall responsibility.

The partnership board is established and regular managers' reports ensure that they are kept informed about developments at the centre. The partnership board has set targets for themselves as a board and has begun to set targets for the centre. The family forum feeds into the work of the partnership board. Parents and carers are encouraged to be part of the partnership board and contribute to the work of the centre.

The centre uses a range of techniques to obtain feedback from parents and carers. This feedback is used by the centre to assess whether it is continuing to meet the needs of its users and to identify any possible improvements. Opportunities to feed back to a wider audience about the evaluations undertaken by the centre are sometimes missed. The centre is aware that it needs to obtain the views of non-users and is looking at ways that it can effectively do this.

The centre's leaders and staff work very well together. Supervision and management arrangements are clear and well understood. Outreach workers additionally meet regularly to review their caseloads and for group supervision. Centre staff have good opportunities for professional development and are encouraged to develop specialist skills where possible.

Safeguarding arrangements are in place and are robust. Safeguarding employment practices for staff employed directly through the centre are rigorous and follow the local authority procedures. Commissioned services are responsible for checking their own staff and are required to ensure that all safeguarding procedures are in place. The centre has established links with the local women's refuge to support parents and carers who experience domestic violence. Staff are very sensitive in supporting parents and carers emotional needs.

Equality and diversity are promoted satisfactorily at the centre. Books available for families reflect some aspects of the wider community and there are some dual language books. Displays and publicity within the centre are not reflective of the wider community and do not include positive images of excluded groups. There is limited information around the centre in community languages. Where the centre has targeted specific groups, for example teenage parents and carers, this has been successful. The centre is welcoming to families with disabilities although the building is not fully wheelchair accessible.

Centre staff have built an excellent range of effective partnerships. In particular the centre teacher has built very good links with local early years settings and centre staff have built excellent links with health colleagues. Partner organisations are actively encouraged to contribute to the centre's self-evaluation and future planning documents.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day-to-day management arrangements are clear and understood	2
The extent to which ambitious targets drive improvement, provision is integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community	2
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	3
The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults	2
The extent to which evaluation is used to shape and improve services and activities	2
The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services the centre has been commissioned to provide	1
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	2

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Branches Children's Centre on 6–7 July 2011. We judged the centre as good overall.

The centre provides a welcoming environment for families. Many of you told us how much you have benefited from the services provided by the centre and how you enjoy attending. Some of you travel a considerable distance to attend. We were impressed by the excellent relationships that staff develop with you. Comments made to inspectors by those of you we spoke to included 'coming here was the start of getting back on track' and that the centre is 'fantastic, absolutely amazing, could not fault it!'

The centre offers a safe and secure environment and all appropriate checks are completed to ensure that staff and volunteers are suitable to work with children. Centre staff work with you to help you to recognise dangers and how to keep your family safe. The centre offers a range of opportunities for you and your children to engage in fun activities. You reported to us that you carry on some of these activities with your children at home.

We noticed that you felt the centre is very much part of the community. The centre frequently asks for your views and uses these to improve the services that it offers you and your children. All parents and carers are encouraged to be part of the centre and staff are looking at how they can encourage people to attend who may find it

difficult. We have asked the centre to ensure that the centre promotes all aspects of the community in its work and its publications.

The centre leaders know the centre well and they have a good understanding of what they need to do to make it better. The various plans for improvement they have in place are generally good however we have asked them to develop them further. These developments include making targets clearer and identifying named members of staff who will take a lead for each area.

Thank you to everybody who took the time to come and speak with us and to let us know what you thought about the centre. We are very grateful to you all and wish you and your families every success for the future.

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