

# Inspection report for Birchwood Children's Centre

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<b>Local authority</b>	Lincolnshire
<b>Inspection number</b>	384128
<b>Inspection dates</b>	21–22 September 2011
<b>Reporting inspector</b>	Marian Pearson HMI

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<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	Not previously inspected
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<b>Linked school if applicable</b>	None
<b>Linked early years and childcare, if applicable</b>	YMCA Woodlands Nursery (EY 319646)

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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 head of centre, members of parents' groups and the advisory board, representatives of the local authority, and the statutory, community and voluntary organisations working in partnership with the centre. They also talked informally to parents, carers and users of the centre.

Inspectors observed the centre's work and visited the designated day-care provision. They also looked at a range of relevant documentation, including evaluations, key policies and safeguarding procedures.

## Information about the centre

Birchwood Children's Centre serves the Birchwood and Hartsholme wards in south-west Lincoln. Many families live in social housing on two large estates with some owner-occupied properties surrounding these. Within the reach area, there are pockets of extreme deprivation with one area being in the highest 3% of the most deprived areas nationally. Unemployment is high, particularly in the Birchwood ward, and qualification levels are low. Many of those in employment are unskilled and low-waged. When children start school at the age of three years, their levels of skills and knowledge are generally below those expected for their age. The vast majority of families are of White British heritage, although a growing number of people of Eastern European origin have recently moved into the area.

The centre developed from a Sure Start local programme and was designated as a children's centre in March 2006. Most of the services are delivered from a purpose-built centre which is also regularly used by other agencies for meetings and as a base for their staff. Premises providing supported accommodation for young parents and local schools are used as venues for some outreach services. The centre

provides the full core offer and a wide range of supporting services, including crèche facilities for disabled children.

The local authority has governance responsibility, providing strategic direction and annual challenge. A restructuring of staffing and leadership and management of the centre has recently taken place. The Principal Practitioner, who has had a strategic role in the centre for several years, now has overall responsibility for the centre, including day-to-day management. The centre employs few staff directly, with most service delivery commissioned through partner agencies on a district or county basis. Partner agencies have also been subject to significant restructuring and some recommissioning of service delivery. A memorandum of agreement is in place with health service providers and JobCentre Plus. Health professionals use the centre to offer a range of services and activities for children and families.

The centre's designated early years and childcare provider is YMCA Woodlands Nursery which is situated on the site of Woodlands Infant and Nursery School. The provider was last inspected in June 2006 and judged to be good. The report for this inspection can be found at [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk).

## 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**

**2**

### Capacity for sustained improvement

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

**1**

## Main findings

The effectiveness of Birchwood Children's Centre is good overall. It has outstanding features. The centre has an excellent understanding of local families' needs and prioritises its work successfully to support families whose circumstances make them most vulnerable. Highly effective management of contracts and rigorous evaluation of delivery by partner agencies have led to services being appropriately refocused to continue to meet the needs of users. As a result, a large majority of those using the centre's services are very satisfied and participation levels are extremely high. A typical comment from users is: 'Me and my child have developed so much since we started using the centre. I've made friends and we've both learned new skills. I'm just glad that I came through the door.'

Outcomes for children and families are consistently good and improving; some are outstanding. Parents' and carers' aspirations for themselves and their children are high. Babies and children thoroughly enjoy the comprehensive range of high-quality learning activities, well-planned around the Early Years Foundation Stage. They become independent, inquisitive learners as their parents and carers develop the confidence to let them explore the excellently resourced environment. These experiences, together with extremely well-managed transition arrangements, mean that children are ready to learn when they start school and progress quickly. Tracking of children who have attended the centre's services shows that their achievements are higher when assessed at five years of age than those who have not.

Adults also enjoy their learning. Their self-confidence and parenting skills have improved greatly. They use their learning to inspire activities at home and adopt healthier lifestyles for their families. The impact of training on users' economic well-being is not clearly evidenced across the centre as a whole. Although partner agencies currently track adults' progress, the information is not routinely brought together to enhance planning for individual learning.

All users, including children, show outstanding levels of respect for others with the result that the centre is calm, friendly and welcoming. Parents and carers are extremely well represented on the advisory board and volunteers are valued for the key role they play in the centre. They devote an abundance of time and energy to plan and deliver a wide range of different activities during holiday periods, including outings and themed events. Their experiences in areas such as financial management, grant-seeking and health and safety are of mutual benefit as they improve users' employability skills.

Care, guidance and support are excellent, especially for families in crisis. Early intervention for vulnerable children and families, through consistent use of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF), is particularly effective in lessening the need for higher-level interventions. The centre has been very successful in engaging with minority groups and promotes equality and diversity well. Provision for disabled children and young parents is of particularly high quality and well focused to meet their needs.

Leadership and management are good. Centre staff and partner agencies have been resilient through the many recent changes. The new leadership team has tackled swiftly the identified areas for development. For example, immediate action was taken to ensure that all staff have an up-to-date knowledge and understanding of safeguarding procedures. Users feel safe and are confident to raise any concerns. Robust safeguarding procedures are in place, and health and safety are given very high priority by all staff.

The advisory board meets regularly and members are supportive and effectively involved in centre improvements. Consistently high-quality provision, together with very strong leadership and management, has led to good and improving outcomes

for children and families. Senior leaders have created an extremely clear plan for development because self-evaluation is highly effective. With these very solid foundations and the changes already made by the new leadership team, the centre has outstanding capacity to improve further.

## What does the centre need to do to improve further?

### Recommendations for further improvement

- Improve outcomes for economic well-being for adult users by:
  - ensuring that the information held by partner agencies about adult learner's achievements is brought together
  - using these consolidated records to inform planning of training programmes.

## How good are outcomes for families?

2
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Very positive relationships between staff, children and adult users of the centre are evident in all activities. Social care colleagues identify that a key strength of the centre is its 'unique way of working which is non-threatening to families'. This results in very effective interventions at an early stage, reducing the need for more intensive work later. A number of users described how far the centre has helped them to 'get their lives together'. For example, one user said she had moved from being 'in tears every day to being on the advisory board'. They are passionate about 'giving something back in return'.

Key workers in the crèches ensure that children's emotional and developmental needs are very well met. The centre has been very proactive in ensuring take-up of places on the 'Two-year-olds pilot' for subsidised childcare. This has resulted in children who might otherwise not have accessed pre-school provision now doing so. Language and communication skills have improved, through focused and structured learning such as 'Chatter Matters'. There has been an impressive rise in the scores of children assessed at five years of age so that these are now close to the national average. Parents of disabled children are particularly pleased that individual care plans are in place for their children and that every small step is recorded to evidence their achievements.

The aspirations of teenage parents have been raised very effectively. They have set targets for themselves in developing their culinary and employability skills and some have enrolled on college courses as a result of the encouragement they have received from the centre. They told inspectors that they want to do the best they can for themselves and their children.

The 'What Women Want' group has been proactive in evaluating its own needs. Training requested has improved participants' skills and their household budgeting through learning how to service cars and alter school uniforms. Economic stability is supported through formal and informal information, advice and guidance discussions,

access to job vacancy notices, and practical assistance in applying for jobs. Case studies of users gaining employment and a consistently decreasing number of people receiving jobseekers' allowance indicate that these measures have been successful. However, the centre is unable to demonstrate clearly its overall impact on economic well-being as it does not collate data from partner agencies about training programmes undertaken by users.

Practical support to initiate and sustain breastfeeding has led to almost 40% of babies being breastfed at six to eight weeks. Although still below local targets, this represents a 30% increase on the previous year. Parent-led events such as 'Fruity Friday' raise awareness of how healthy foods can be just as satisfying as more fattening ones. The healthy-eating pathway includes clear advice for those bottle-feeding and weaning their babies not to over-feed. As a result of such initiatives, the number of children who are obese at the end of their Reception Year has reduced and is now very close to the national average. Users report that programmes, such as the smoke-free homes project and 'Physicool Kids' sessions, are helping their families to lead healthier lifestyles.

Health professionals call into play and learning sessions to offer advice and specialist expertise. Parents appreciated their 'Ten Top Tips' in managing children's behaviour, and took note of the danger of hot drinks, after viewing a DVD about burns and scalds. Analysis of increased emergency hospital admissions led to a renewed focus on safety in the home relating to hygiene and storage of poisonous substances. Families most in need benefit from provision of safety equipment fitted by trained staff and report increased awareness of how to keep their children safe at home as a result of the safety assessments.

These are the grades for the outcomes for families

<b>The extent to which children, including those from target groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which all children and parents, including those from target groups, enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>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</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>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</b>	<b>2</b>

**How good is the provision?**

**1**

The centre assesses the needs of its users sensitively and appropriately, tailoring services to meet their needs very effectively. Multi-agency support for individual families in their own homes has proven to be extremely effective in reducing the numbers of looked-after children and those in need of child protection plans. Families who are supported by a 'Team around the Child' approach are empowered to contribute to the plans; this ownership enhances the potential for a successful conclusion. With high-quality support from centre staff, they are successfully supported to come into the centre and make use of its excellent range of activities and services. Parents of disabled children feel very well supported to share their worries and feelings with empathetic staff in the Helping Hands crèche. One parent said, 'It has helped me to come to terms with my child's needs and to understand my own.'

Children have great fun learning in sessions such as 'Messy Monsters' where they take delight in discovering different textures. 'Observation stations', found in all play and learning sessions, enable staff and parents to record and recognise children's achievement and plan the next steps for learning. Recently introduced quality assurance monitoring visits ensure consistently high-quality delivery of these sessions. Subsidised childcare places and flexible, high-quality crèche provision increases accessibility to courses and, for those families in need, provides welcome respite care. Outreach sessions have been extended to local schools to ensure all families have access to play and learning sessions. Families whose first language is not English make good use of language classes and are pleased that their children's communication skills are developing very well as they join in activities with other children. Adults thoroughly enjoy their learning and the wide range of courses offered. They want to continue to learn.

Health provision is well coordinated, with sexual health services, parent-craft classes, baby massage sessions and baby clinic delivered from the centre. These sessions successfully encourage expectant and new parents to use other centre services. The centre has become one of the hubs in the community where families know they can access support. 'Larder vouchers' and hardship funds have an immediate material impact on improving families' lives. Outreach services and centre staff meet the needs of users well. The centre helps families to engage very effectively with other agencies for help with longer-term problems such as managing debt and reducing substance dependency. Partner agencies speak highly of the staff's expertise, recognising they will be able to provide them with contact points for other services, such as legal advice, for the families they are working with.

These are the grades for the quality of provision



<b>The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of families, including those in target groups</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups</b>	<b>1</b>

## **How effective are the leadership and management?**

**2**

Leaders and managers at all levels are very clear about the centre's priorities, through their perceptive analysis of its current strengths and areas for development. They skilfully assess how to make best use of partner agencies' strengths so that they complement and add value to each other's service delivery. An unambiguous sense of purpose to improve the lives of children and families pervades the centre's work and that of its partner agencies. Staff are well deployed on an inter-agency basis, and the very effective management of contracts ensures that the centre provides good value for money.

Governance and accountability arrangements are effective. Children's centre managers are provided with support and challenge by the local authority and by their peers. Regular supervision arrangements ensure that leaders and managers monitor very effectively the allocation, progress and outcomes of the centre's work with families in need and vulnerable children to ensure their safety and improved well-being.

Staff and volunteers are appointed using safer recruitment procedures and safeguarding checks are effectively in place for all those delivering services from the centre. Prior to the awarding of contracts, partner agencies are scrutinised by the local authority to ensure safeguarding policies and procedures meet their own exemplary standards. All staff and users inspectors spoke to were knowledgeable about safeguarding practices and how to refer any concerns.

Partnership working between key agencies is well established and robust information-sharing protocols ensuring that families receive timely support when they need it most. All partners have service specifications linked to their specialist area of expertise, such as Home-Start and a local community agency being responsible for recruitment and training of volunteers. These specific targets support the priorities in the centre's development plan and are reviewed frequently to ensure they continue to be finely tuned to the current needs of the community. For example, when the centre became increasingly aware of the fragile emotional health of some users, the hours of counselling commissioned to provide them with professional support were extended.

The centre assesses effectively the impact of new developments on different groups of users, making any adjustments as required. It provides a welcoming and inclusive

environment for all families in the community. Equality and diversity are promoted successfully because of high expectations of the leaders and staff. Compared with other children's centres in the county, a high proportion of young parents, those whose first language is not English, and families with disabled members regularly access universal services and specialist provision. Fathers have been prominent users of the centre but their involvement has waned recently because of the closure of a Saturday morning session. Although fathers are increasingly joining other groups, additional ways of addressing their needs are currently being explored.

Users' views are highly valued. Through the use of cameras, children are able to record what they like most about sessions, thus ensuring that their views contribute extremely successfully to future planning. Adults' comments are collected at the end of each session and the parent group provides feedback to the advisory board.

These are the grades for leadership and management

<b>The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day-to-day management arrangements are clear and understood</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secure improvement in outcomes</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>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</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>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</b>	<b>1</b>

## **Any other information used to inform the judgements made during this inspection**

The Ofsted reports on the centre's designated day-care provision and local schools were scrutinised to provide contextual information.

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## Summary for centre users

We inspected the Birchwood Children's Centre on 21 and 22 September 2011. We judged the centre as good overall.

The centre has been very successful in encouraging families to use its services. You told us that it is helping significantly in improving your lives and those of your children. Although there have been some changes in staffing and management recently, the centre staff have excellent relationships with those of you who use its services. They change their priorities as your needs change to ensure that the services delivered are still the most appropriate ones for you. As a result of this, a large majority of you say you are very satisfied with the services you receive and are glad that you came to the centre.

You are keen to do well and help your children to succeed. The range of high-quality play and learning sessions is helping your children to develop skills so that they are ready to learn quickly when they start school. We enjoyed watching their exploration of the different textures in the 'Messy Monsters' session and across all sessions, observing how independent they were, even some of the babies. Provision for young parents and families with disabled children is particularly impressive.

The centre is a very calm, friendly and welcoming place. This is because you all respect each other and follow the codes of conduct in the centre. Inspectors were impressed with the number of volunteers in the centre and the way in which you seek the funding for the holiday activities you plan and deliver. Your views about the type of activities you want are listened to and you are very keen to be involved in the advisory board.

You also feel safe in the centre and are confident to share any concerns. Staff across partner agencies work very well together to ensure that those of you who are facing difficult circumstances are provided with support very quickly when you need it most. The care, guidance and support available to you are excellent.

Many of you have participated in courses which have helped you develop your parenting skills and gain ideas of activities you can do at home. More of you are breastfeeding with the support of Breast Start, and sessions such as 'Physicool' are helping you to develop healthier lifestyles. Some of you have requested training which will help you with very practical skills, such as altering school uniforms, which is also helping your family budgeting.

However, because it works with different agencies to deliver training, the centre is not as clear as it could be about the overall impact it is having in helping you to gain employment. We have asked the centre to ensure that this information is gathered together to help celebrate your achievements and plan your next steps in learning.

Thank you to everyone who took time to meet or speak with us or provided information for us. We are very grateful for your involvement in the inspection and wish you every success for the future.

The full report is available from your centre or on our website: [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk).