

Inspection report for Blossom Children's Centre

Local authority	Kent
Inspection number	406992
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Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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Linked school if applicable	The Downs Church of England Primary School 118684
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Bramble Nursery EY432414

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 an additional inspector and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with representatives from the local authority, the community, private, independent and voluntary agencies, early years teacher and volunteers. They also met with the network manager, centre leader, front line staff, the headteacher of the co-located primary school, parents, and staff from the health services.

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

Information about the centre

Blossom Children's Centre is a phase 2 centre that was designated in February 2008. It operated from different venues in the town until September 2011 when it transferred to a purpose-built building on the same site as The Downs Church of England Primary School. To meet its core purpose the centre provides early childhood education, family support, employment advice and child and family health services. The centre accommodates midwifery, health visiting and child and adolescent mental health services, and Brambles Nursery, a privately run nursery for 26 children aged from 2 to 4 years. Outreach services are arranged in a range of venues across the area the centre serves.

Governance arrangements stem from the Kent Children's Trust and the Local Children's Trust Board. Blossom is one of eight centres in the area that are overseen by the Dover, Deal and Sandwich Children's Centre Advisory Board and Locality Coordinator. Since September 2012, the overall management of children's centres in the local authority has moved from education to social services. The centre leader has responsibility for three other centres within the district. Blossom Children's Centre serves the wards of Mill Hill, Middle Deal and Sholden, and parts of Sandwich

and Walmer. Levels of deprivation across the reach vary but include areas that are among the 30% most deprived nationally.

The reach area includes 1,021 children under five years of age. Families live in privately owned homes, rented accommodation, social housing and flats. The percentage of children living in workless households is similar to the national picture, but is increasing with the closure of a major employer. The large majority of families come from White British backgrounds; others come from a range of cultures. Children’s knowledge, skills and abilities on entry to early years provision are below those expected for their age, especially in communication, language and literacy.

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

2

Main findings

Blossom Children’s Centre is a good centre that has rapidly established itself within the community. Since moving into the new building many more families are using its services and making positive changes to their lives. The number of families from all target groups who are registered and attend regularly, taking part in engaging activities, has risen from fewer than half to almost 700 in one year. Highly successful community events, such as ‘launch day’, ‘summer fun day’ and ‘mini Olympics’, have raised the profile of the centre within the locality.

The provision of midwifery and other health services on site means new families, including teenage parents, get to know staff quickly and continue their attendance at the centre. Facilities make it easy for those with a disability to access sessions. The strong emphasis on enabling fathers to become involved in their child’s development, through sessions designed especially for them, and at their request, has been particularly successful. Activities take place in other venues to enable those living some distance from the centre to also benefit from its support. Parents appreciate fully the warm, welcoming, inclusive and supportive atmosphere. They know that staff will support them in times of crisis, giving them the confidence to overcome the challenges they are facing. One parent said that she valued the work of the centre highly. She said, ‘I would be isolated without the centre. It is good to speak to other mums and realise you share the same issues. I can talk to the staff easily about any

concerns I have.'

The provision of health services on site, parenting and first aid courses, high uptake of safety equipment, and advice about healthy eating, are helping families to adopt safer and healthier lifestyles. Outreach workers, together with other professionals, offer significant support to the most vulnerable families. The coordinated approach in the centre and in other early years settings to promote children's communication, language and literacy skills is successful. At age five, children are achieving levels in line with children of the same age nationally. The sudden withdrawal of a major employer in the area has led to a rapid rise in workless families. It has been difficult for the centre to engage with Jobcentre beyond the statutory interviews for lone families. Staff are working with Skills Factory, an external provider, to help parents gain access to training in literacy, numeracy and employability skills. In addition, the centre works in partnership with a group that promotes volunteering as a pathway to work. These partnerships are new and it is too soon to show the impact of their work.

Leaders and managers collect and use a wide range of data to check the impact of the children's centre and set challenging targets for improvement. However, with the rapid expansion of the centre, data are not always collected in the same way. Leaders and managers have identified that this sometimes affects its reliability, for example the number of mothers sustaining breastfeeding and those returning to work. Children were observed making good progress in their learning during the inspection. However, staff make few records to confirm this, or to track the progress of adults in their educational achievements. Regular feedback from parents provides a clear view of the centre's immediate impact. As the centre has only become established in a permanent venue in the past year, the collection and analysis of data are at an early stage of development. The centre has already made arrangements to collaborate with partners to track the progress of families in the long term.

The centre has a good capacity to improve. Skilled leaders and managers, robust self-evaluation, challenging targets, strong teamwork, close working partnerships with public, voluntary and independent providers and forward planning are supporting the drive towards higher outcomes for families.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Enable more families to improve their financial circumstances by:
 - increasing opportunities for adults to improve their educational achievements, especially in literacy, numeracy and workplace skills
 - strengthening the links between the centre, the Skills Factory, Jobcentre and other groups supporting families back into work.
- Ensure that data are collected in the same way so that staff can easily check:
 - the progress of children and adults attending activities
 - the impact of the centre's work in the medium and longer term.

How good are outcomes for families?

2

Through good provision, the centre is enabling families to live healthier lifestyles. The percentage of children aged five who are obese has varied over the last three years, but has fallen from 17.7% in 2009 to 7.4% in 2011, which is well below the national average. Parenting and cookery courses, such as Fun with Food, have altered the approach of many families towards healthy eating. At the request of a parent, a gardening club has been established so that children can grow and eat a variety of vegetables. High immunisation rates, buggy walks, trips to the nearby nature reserve and the swimming pool contribute to the physical well-being of families. The percentage of mothers sustaining breastfeeding their babies at six to eight weeks is increasing slowly, but is not as high as found nationally. That said, the method by which data are collected has changed recently and is not wholly reliable.

The uptake of home safety equipment and attendance at Save a Baby's Life courses has been high. One parent said the course had proved invaluable when her nine-month-old baby choked. She was able to deal with the situation confidently. The strong promotion of health and safety has contributed to the reduction by 50% in the number of children admitted to accident and emergency in the area. Classes to raise parenting skills and improve children's behaviour, one-to-one support and advice with regard to domestic abuse have improved parents' confidence and mental well-being. One parent said, 'It was great to be encouraged to step back and think before I reacted. I now deal with situations in a much better way.' Staff work well with a wide range of partners to safeguard children subject to the Common Assessment Framework process.

The development of children's communication, language and literacy skills has high priority. Accredited courses help parents to understand how much children's chatter matters. Under the leadership of the centre teacher mini-libraries have been established in early years settings. Workshops for parents to learn to share stories and make story bags, and the inclusion of singing and fun ways to help children communicate in every session, are proving beneficial. Children's progress is not tracked rigorously enough to help parents refine their children's skills further. A speech therapist based at the centre carries out screening, picks up areas of concern early and works with staff and parents to resolve them. Consequently, the percentage of children achieving 78 points across all the areas of learning at age five has risen from 52.15% in 2009 to 60.91% in 2011, just above the national average. At the same time, the gap between the lowest achieving children and others aged five has reduced by almost 2%.

The uptake of courses for parenting skills, especially with regard to behaviour management, is high. These courses effectively develop parents' personal development and confidence. Ten parents have become volunteers at the centre. Through their evaluations of courses and staff consultations, parents influence the centre's provision. Events at the weekend for working families, 'baby massage for

dads', and courses such as 'Under the bonnet', mean many fathers are involved in their child's learning and development. Parents are represented on the advisory board, but their attendance is sporadic.

The number of children aged from birth to four years living in workless households is rising. Staff are developing a new partnership with agencies in the voluntary sector to help parents to raise their aspirations, to gain new skills and qualifications and return to work. This is still at an early stage of development. Outreach workers provide advice about benefits and young parents are signposted to Connexions services to enhance their employment opportunities. The centre has little data to show the number of parents involved in further education, their progress and if they have returned to work.

These are the grades for the outcomes for families

The extent to which children, including those from target groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles	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 children and parents, including those from target groups, 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 parents, including those from target groups, contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	2
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents, including those from target groups, are developing economic stability and independence including access to training and employment	3

How good is the provision?

2

As the centre is in a new location, the main focus has been to attract families through engaging provision for the children. Attractive, inviting newsletters about events, courses and sessions in all centres in the locality are circulated each month to registered families and are advertised in the community. Staff have in-depth knowledge of the locality. They use this knowledge, data and information from partners in health and the local community to devise programmes that meet the needs of all the target groups, and to extend further the number of families registered. Staff have been particularly successful in engaging young parents, lone and workless families, fathers, parents and children with a disability in their child's learning by listening to their views and designing activities for them.

The centre's provision reflects a good balance of targeted and universal services to promote children's development and parenting skills. Baby Club, Inbetweenies and Stay and Play are very popular. They enable parents, and grandparents, to play and

have fun with their children at different stages of their development. Stay and Play sessions held in the town centre allow parents to have their babies weighed and seek the advice of a health visitor. In sessions, staff demonstrate many different ways in which parents can interact with their children to develop the skills they need to acquire before starting school. Trips out extend children’s knowledge, skills and understanding across the Early Years Foundation Stage. Learning and development for adults to enable them to gain skills to enhance their economic well-being are less well developed.

Case studies reflect the centre’s success in giving parents the confidence to make important decisions to change their lives. Outreach work is a particular strength. In cooperation with a range of services, outreach staff tailor care, support and guidance to the needs of individual families, especially those who are in crisis. One parent said, ‘With two children under three I do not know how I would have managed without the advice of staff at the centre.’

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	2
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups	2
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups	2

How effective are the leadership and management?

2

Day-to-day management of the centre ensures that staff share a strong common purpose and approach to supporting families in all target groups. They use the views of parents well to develop the range of provision. New arrangements for the governance and accountability of children’s centres are clearly understood, and leaders are focusing energetically on improving further the outcomes for families.

An annual cycle of rigorous evaluation, that includes contributions and data from key partners, leads to challenging targets. Leaders report progress towards these targets to the advisory board on a quarterly basis. Reports for the past year show that the centre has been particularly successful in reaching its targets in engaging an increased number of vulnerable families.

Safeguarding has a high priority. Staff are well trained and are meticulous in implementing policies and procedures. Background checks on all who are involved in the centre are robust. Staff work well with key partners to safeguard children who are subject to the Common Assessment Framework or on child protection plans. Parents subject to domestic abuse are signposted to the help they need. The decision to accommodate a range of health services within the centre is enabling

higher levels of support for some families. Partnership work with the local police and community warden is strong and helps families to keep safe in the locality. Good partnerships with the local school and early years settings are improving children’s learning and development, as well as their well-being.

Inclusion is key to the work of the centre. All families, but especially those with disabilities, value their full inclusion in all that the centre has to offer. Staff are currently using ‘persona dolls’ very effectively to help young children and families understand the diversity of modern day society.

Finances are monitored rigorously, including the costs of activities to ensure good value for money. Parents are keen to attend as staff are welcoming and supportive; the building and resources are high quality and very well maintained. Leadership and management and staff expertise are shared with other centres across the locality to sustain and improve the quality of provision and outcomes for families.

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 effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secure improvement in outcomes	2
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	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	2
The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services provided by the centre to meet its core purpose	2
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	2

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

Information from the inspection reports for Brambles Nursery and The Downs Church of England Primary School were used to inform judgements. These reports can be found at www.ofsted.gov.uk.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Blossom Children's Centre on 4 and 5 September 2012. We judged the centre as good overall.

We enjoyed meeting with you when we visited the centre recently. Thank you for taking the time to talk to us and contributing to the inspection. You said that you really appreciate the advice and support that staff give you especially when you have a lot of worry. One of you said, 'With two children under three I do not know how I would have managed without the advice of staff at the centre.' You also mentioned that you really appreciate the way the centre includes everyone regardless of their background or need.

As you know, the centre moved into its new building last September. Since then it has rapidly established itself within the community. Many more families are attending because the centre offers a wide range of services. You can easily meet the midwife and health visitor and seek advice about your child's speech development. You enjoy the many engaging activities where you can play along with your children. You appreciate the way that staff consult you about the activities you would like to see taking place in the centre. As a result, there are activities at the weekend for those who are working, and that enable fathers to be involved in their child's development.

The courses to help you manage your child's behaviour and keep your child safe are proving beneficial. One of you told us that following the Save a Baby's Life course, your child choked and you dealt with the situation confidently. Many of you have changed your approach to healthy eating through Fun with Food and the gardening club. Your participation in the buggy walks and trips to the nature reserve help to keep you and your children fit, and learn more about the natural world.

Your children make good progress in their learning, especially their communication, language and literacy skills. Staff show you the best ways to help your children learn, not only in the centre but also at home. This is enabling children in the locality to achieve as well as others nationally at the age of five. However, staff do not record the progress children make to help you to refine their skills and improve at a faster rate.

The main focus for the centre has been to give you all the support you need with your children. There have been fewer opportunities for you to improve your own literacy, numeracy and employability skills. It has been hard for the centre to fully engage with Jobcentre. It has made a new partnership with Skills Factory and a community volunteer group to enable more of you to develop these skills and find a

pathway back into work. We have asked the centre to strengthen these links and those with Jobcentre to change your financial circumstances for the better.

The centre collects a great deal of numerical information to check the impact it is having on the community and to set challenging targets to achieve. This is to enable staff to check the centre's success in helping you and your children to make progress and to change your lives over time. We have asked staff to make sure that the information is collected in the same way and is used to track your progress and that of your children.

Staff at the centre listen carefully to your views and work energetically to bring about improvements. Each year they evaluate the centre's strengths and areas for development. They also take into account the views of those that they work with in partnership to make sure you have the support you need. Their aim, with your assistance, is to make the centre the best that it can be.

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