

Inspection report for Brett River Children's Centre

Local authority	Suffolk
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Centre leader	Janet Norden
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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 an additional inspector and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with senior leaders, a range of partners, advisory board members, local authority representatives, childminders, parents and grandparents. They also observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation including the self-evaluation form and annual conversation report.

Information about the centre

Brett River is a phase two children's centre which opened in 2008 and meets its full core purpose. The centre is located in the market town of Hadleigh which is situated in the large rural locality of south Suffolk. An army and air force base is located at Wattisham four miles north of the town. Families live in a mix of social, privately rented and owner-occupied housing. Brett River's reach area is ranked the eighth most deprived area in southern Suffolk in relation to barriers to transport and housing. North Hadleigh ward has the highest proportion of lone parents and job seeker and income support claimants in the locality. Some 15% of families are in receipt of working tax credit.

There are 825 children aged under five years living in the reach area. The vast majority of families are of White British heritage. Children's skills, knowledge and abilities when they enter early years provision are typically at the level expected for their age.

The centre is open from 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday throughout the year and also two Saturday mornings a month when a 'Time with my Dad' group takes place. Additionally, the centre runs regular programmes during the school holidays for families to drop in and attend play sessions. The children's centre services operate

from two main sites very close to one another in Market Place, although the centre will be moving into one building very shortly.

The centre shares a manager with Cherry Blossom Children’s Centre which serves an adjacent reach area in Suffolk and north-east Essex. An advisory body provides governance and comprises representatives from partner agencies, while the local authority is the appropriate body.

There have been significant staff changes and absences over the last twelve months. At the time of the inspection, the substantive centre manager was absent and the integrated services manager for the south Suffolk locality was overseeing the work of the centre as well as undertaking her other duties.

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

4

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

4

Main findings

The centre’s overall effectiveness is inadequate and, although outcomes are currently satisfactory, there is inadequate capacity to improve them because of significant weaknesses in leadership and management, specifically at the strategic level.

Currently, there are no plans or specific strategy to drive forward necessary change, and staff feel that the lack of direction is impeding their ability to help take the centre forward. Limited use is being made of the data available to help shape provision, and there is very little use of targets to help the centre monitor how effective its actions are in bringing about improvement. Self-evaluation does not provide an accurate appraisal of the centre’s effectiveness, and stakeholders do not consistently contribute to the process. The centre is aware that improvement is required and some work has been done very recently to pinpoint the key priorities arising from the annual conversation with the local authority. Governance arrangements are unclear. The advisory board does not comply with its terms of reference, and its role in looking critically at the centre’s performance is unsatisfactory. In view of these weaknesses, the centre’s value for money is judged as inadequate.

Outcomes are currently satisfactory, and this reflects the commitment of the staff team which works hard to help the families who engage with the centre to lead healthy lives, keep safe and make a positive contribution. Partnerships involve the sharing of information between different agencies and result in the dovetailing of services, particularly concerning safeguarding matters. The care and guidance provided are satisfactory with outreach work proving particularly effective in helping families in times of crisis. For example, timely interventions empower families suffering domestic abuse to live more positive lives. The centre provides a place of safety for supervised access and helps families build stronger bonds.

Centre activities are appropriately planned to promote children's first steps to learning. The personal and social development of adults is supported soundly through sessions that help build their confidence and parenting skills. The centre provides effective support that helps some families get out of debt and secure financial stability. Those who want to extend their employability skills are signposted to appropriate learning and development opportunities. However, there is no record of how many families access training, and leaders are not following up what the longer-term impact is on improving the economic well-being of families, particularly those from workless homes.

All target groups are represented across the programme of centre activities. However, the proportions that attend from some groups, such as lone parents, are small. The centre's work to encourage families to engage with its services, especially those living in its most disadvantaged community, is not focused with sufficient precision. As a result, just under 50% of families in the reach area are registered with the centre and about a third are in regular contact. Staff have undertaken a range of marketing activities, such as distributing fliers at school fetes, but there is no strategy in place to guide their efforts, and their actions have met with limited success. This ad hoc approach restricts the centre's capacity to extend its sphere of influence and build for better effectiveness.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Improve leadership and management to ensure that services fully meet local needs and result in improving the outcomes for children and families by:
 - clarifying governance arrangements and ensuring that the advisory board meets its terms of reference and rapidly develops its role in holding the centre to account
 - making fully effective use of all available data about the impact of the centre's work, in order that improvement planning is accurately focused on the key priorities, measurable targets are set and appropriate timelines established for completion
 - implementing a robust and cohesive system of self-evaluation which includes systematic monitoring, tracking and the measuring of the

- effectiveness of activities and services
 - ensuring that all staff, partners and parents are clear about the centre's priorities and have appropriate opportunities to help realise them.
- Sharpen assessment systems and target resources more effectively so that the percentage of all target groups who access the centre's services increases significantly and adapt provision to better meet the needs of lone parents and families from workless homes.
 - Establish a tracking system so that the centre has accurate information about the progress made by adults who take up further learning and the impact this has, particularly on improving their employability.

How good are outcomes for families?

3

Outcomes are currently satisfactory because the staff team is ensuring that the satisfactory impact of the services the centre delivers is maintained despite the absence of strategic direction, robust forward planning and effective governance.

Families are helped to live healthier lives through courses such as 'Meals Made Easy' which raise low income families' awareness about the value of cooking inexpensive and nutritional meals. Activities such as baby yoga promote physical development, as babies stretch and strengthen their muscles. The 'Just Peachee' buggy walk in August engaged parents in enjoyable physical activity with their children. Obesity levels in the area are below both the county and national average. The centre 'champions' breastfeeding and, through its partnership with the breastfeeding network, is supporting improvement. Sustained breastfeeding rates are broadly in line with the county average.

The centre helps families keep safe through their effective partnership work with health, social care, the locality team and charitable organisations such as Home-Start. Talks given by the police, road safety and fire officers raise awareness about how to keep safe in the home and neighbourhood. Incidents of domestic violence are responded to quickly and ensure that sufferers are empowered to deal with their situation. The centre's involvement with the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) and Team Around the Child (TAC) procedures lead to families in contact with the centre being effectively protected. Parents identify that they feel safe when they attend activities. One mother's views sum this up, 'The centre is a life saver for me, it has given me the opportunity to meet other mums and babies, everyone is extremely friendly and supportive.'

Activities such as 'Rise and Shine' and 'Walkers and Talkers' are planned in accordance with the Early Years Foundation Stage and effectively engage parents and children. Children living in the reach area make good progress from their starting points with an above average 66.5% achieving 78+ scale points by the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage. The gap between the lowest-achieving 20% and the

rest is reducing rapidly and, at 20.3%, the gap is much narrower than seen nationally. The centre aims to work more closely with local schools and army families to develop the relatively weaker aspect, children’s literacy and language skills, and has joined the Book Trust to extend its reading resources.

Parents identify that their confidence and self-belief are nurtured due to their participation in the courses the centre organises such as positive parenting. Effective financial support has resulted in some families taking up benefits for which they are eligible and getting out of debt. Those who want to extend their employability skills are signposted to appropriate learning and development opportunities and the centre has sponsored one volunteer to complete an accredited community parent programme. Parents told inspectors that more would like this opportunity but it is not currently available. Parents and grandparents identify that they are confident to put forward their views and that someone always listens to their suggestions. However, none are currently active in a more formal decision-making forum or governance.

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	3
The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	3
The extent to which all children and parents, including those from target groups, enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	3
The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships and parents, including those from target groups, contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	3
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?

4

The overall provision is inadequate despite some satisfactory aspects because the centre is not assessing the needs of the reach area precisely enough and there is limited use of data to ensure that resources are appropriately targeted. For example, there is no specific analysis of the needs of workless families with young children; no record of how many of these families access training; and no follow-up to see what improvement there has been to their economic well-being. All target groups are represented across the programme of centre activities, but this is more by chance than design. While the numbers that attend from some groups, such as lone parents, are small, the participation rate of other groups, such as fathers, is increasing. The centre is aware of the variations but has not yet set specific targets to increase participation rates for all target groups and adapt its provision accordingly.

Learning and development opportunities are satisfactory for families who use the centre. Sessions for children are planned and delivered to promote appropriate early learning experiences, and their effectiveness is reflected in the positive key performance indicator result linked to children’s achievement at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage. Training in sign language, first aid and cooking helps participants build their personal and social skills effectively. Parents’ feedback after the parenting programme identified that putting the advice on how to manage their children’s behaviour into practice has paid dividends. The activities on offer are generally enjoyed as reflected in the comments of one army father, ‘The Saturday group is fantastic and is a good opportunity for children to mix with others and have a great time with their dad.’ Opportunities to access education or training are signposted, but no data are recorded to show whether take-up leads to enhanced achievements.

Care, guidance and support are satisfactory with strengths in the outreach work undertaken with some of the most vulnerable families. Strong links are developing with army families and are building community cohesion. A wide range of information about partners’ services is available, and more sensitive contact details, for example concerning sexually transmitted diseases, are displayed in toilets. Case studies show how effectively family support staff help families through difficult times and how much their lives change for the better. Well-informed advice is assisting some families to reduce their debts and improve their financial well-being, but not enough is done to help families get back into work.

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	4
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups	3
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups	3

How effective are the leadership and management?

4

Inadequate leadership and management in key areas limit the centre’s capacity to sustain improvements and result in it providing unsatisfactory value for money. Nevertheless, day-to-day management of the centre runs smoothly and, despite the high staff turnover and the centre manager’s absence, morale is upbeat. Staff are pulling together to do their best for the community they serve but feel that the lack of strategic direction impedes their fully effective working.

Interim leadership has focused attention on staff supervision, performance management and financial oversight, and all have been maintained satisfactorily.

Equalities and inclusion are promoted soundly; for example, the centre helps some families achieve financial stability and funds transport and childcare costs so that parents can access courses. The centre's close working relationship with army families is helping to reduce feelings of isolation and enable their inclusion in a range of activities. Safeguarding arrangements meet requirements and all staff have undergone the necessary vetting checks and are up to date with training. Effective one-to-one outreach support is provided for families most in need, and their work with children subject to a child protection plan makes a discernible difference.

Families using the centre feel confident to voice their opinions. A 'thought net' located in the foyer captures a range of views while the annual survey invites their response to a series of questions about the life and development of the centre. At 97%, the level of satisfaction by centre users is positive.

The local authority is fully aware of the weaknesses raised by this inspection and the interim leadership has already begun to tackle them by establishing more robust recording systems and using data to identify core priorities. However, the absence of a rigorous improvement plan and effective monitoring systems is still a major barrier to securing improved outcomes and better effectiveness. Self-evaluation is recognised as not being sufficiently rooted in a rigorous appraisal of the centre's effectiveness and has resulted in over-generous judgements with limited evidence to support them.

The arrangements for the centre's governance have been flagged as a concern in the last two annual conversation reports but improvement so far has been minimal. The composition of the advisory board does not meet its agreed terms of reference as parents are not represented and the centre manager is the chairperson. Partners' attendance at meetings is sporadic and this results in a lack of continuity in monitoring performance and decision-making. For example, the agenda for the most recent meeting in July usefully included discussing core priorities, key data and the self-evaluation form but only seven members out of 27 invitees were present and minutes are not routinely circulated. The board's role in looking critically at the centre's performance and holding it to account is unsatisfactory.

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	4
The effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secure improvement in outcomes	4
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	4
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	3
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	3
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	3

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

Not applicable

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Brett River Children's Centre on 5–6 September 2012. We judged the centre as inadequate overall.

We talked with some of you, your children, grandchildren, staff, childminders and a range of partners, advisory board members and representatives of the local authority linked to the centre. We observed the centre's work and looked at a range of documents and concluded that there are significant weaknesses in leadership and management, specifically at the strategic level, that are getting in the way of the centre moving forward and improving what it does.

The centre is aware of the issues we detail in the full report and some work has been done very recently to improve things. However, there is still a lot to do to move things forward, particularly in respect of action planning, target setting, monitoring and self-evaluation processes, all of which we have asked the centre to look at closely. Arrangements for the governance and accountability of the centre are inadequate. We can see that there are no parents currently serving on the advisory board and we have asked the centre to encourage two or three of you to get involved.

Despite these inadequacies, the centre works soundly to help you lead healthy lives, keep safe and make a positive contribution. Staff changes and absences have been significant but the team has done its best to make sure that the programmed activities meet your needs and that you continue to benefit from what is on offer. Partnerships with other agencies result in a secure safety net of support for those families who find themselves in tough situations. The care and guidance provided are

satisfactory with outreach work proving particularly effective in helping those of you facing times of personal crisis. You told us that your views are taken into account and listened to, and it was good to hear that you suggested using lidded cups to avoid any accidents resulting from spilled hot drinks.

Centre activities are appropriately planned to help you and your children learn and build your skills. Your feedback is helpful in shaping future activities, but the centre does not reach out to all families who most need its support. One-to-one interventions are clearly helping some of you to get out of debt and secure financial stability. It is not as clear how many of you are looking for help with getting back to work, although we saw a useful range of information available for you to access.

You told us that not everyone knows about the services available at Brett River and the numbers that attend some groups, such as lone parents, are small. Currently, just under 50% of families in the reach area are registered with the centre and about a third are in regular contact. Staff have undertaken a range of marketing activities such as distributing fliers at school fetes but they have met with limited success. If you have any good ideas about how to get more people attending the centre please let the staff know.

We would like to thank everyone who came to speak to us and wish you and your families the best for the future.

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