

Inspection report for The Balsam Centre Children's Centre

Local authority	Somerset
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Date of previous inspection	none
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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 senior leaders, health professionals, partners who offer services, representatives of the advisory and trustee boards, representatives of the local authority, volunteers, parents and centre users.

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

Information about the centre

The children's centre is located within the Balsam Centre, which is a healthy living centre owned and managed by the community-led charity Wincanton Community Venture. The Centre houses a number of different organisations with similar health, social, therapeutic aims and services, working together for the benefit of the local community. Health visitors and midwives are based within the building. The Balsam Children's Centre opened in 2007 as a phase two centre and is governed by the board of trustees of Wincanton Community Venture on behalf of the local authority. The centre's reach area covers the market town of Wincanton and surrounding villages with isolated areas of deprivation. There are 782 children aged 0–4 in the centre's reach area. Just over 13% of children are in households claiming out of work benefits, below the Somerset rate of 17%. The proportion of children with English as an additional language is 4.6%, an increase from the previous year and almost double the Somerset rate.

The Balsam Children's Centre is open every weekday from 9am to 5pm and provides the full core offer of children's and families' services. Services delivered directly by the centre include breastfeeding peer support, one-to-one and small group support for parents, cookery sessions, baby massage, Somerset Total Communication classes, buggy walks, a singing group for pre-walking children, a toy library plus specific groups and activities for older children.

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

The Balsam Children's Centre provides a good, and in some areas outstanding, range of services for families in the Wincanton and surrounding area. It works very effectively with the voluntary and statutory agencies located in the healthy living centre to provide good activities, support and guidance for users. The quality of the provision is good and has a significant impact on improving the lives of many families. The highly skilled and professional staff have a strong commitment to identifying and meeting the needs of local families. As a consequence, outcomes for users are good. Over 90% of the families in the Wincanton area are registered with the centre, although the registration of families in the wider reach area is lower. Responses by parents to group and individual sessions are overwhelmingly positive. Good-quality, practical and supportive interventions help individual families facing difficulties in their lives and enable them to develop strategies to improve their situations. Children who are particularly vulnerable or have additional needs are supported well. The Common Assessment Framework is used effectively to prioritise services, including the two-year-old funding for nursery places. Children make at least satisfactory progress in relation to their starting points, with the majority making good progress.

The centre has an excellent working relationship with health staff and other professionals, resulting in a coordinated approach to identifying families most in need of support. Health outcomes for the majority of families using the centre are improving as they take advantage of the wide range of centre- and community-based activities offered. Encouraging a healthy lifestyle is a priority of the centre and the expertise developed within the co-located healthy living centre is used to good effect. Access to fresh air, outdoor activities including outdoor play, gardening and buggy walks all contribute to families feeling more healthy. The proportion of mothers in the reach area who sustain breastfeeding at six to eight weeks is above the average for Somerset and significantly above the national average.

Parents feel valued and respected. They say their views are taken seriously and acted upon. Sessions and activities are modified and new ones introduced in response to parent comments and evaluations. They are keen to see the information

technology centre reopen and would like even greater opportunities to develop their cookery skills. Parents are beginning to make a more effective contribution to the running of the centre, although managers recognise that this is an area that will continue to require further development before it is fully embedded into the work of the centre. The centre's capacity for sustaining further improvements is good. Since the centre became operational, improvements in performance have been achieved annually. Leaders and managers know their service well and have a clear vision for the strategic direction of the centre. Their strong focus on improving outcomes for children and families underpins the key decisions and business plan. The centre collects or has access to a wealth of data and information. However, the use of this information in prioritising improvement targets and identifying when actions are successful is not fully effective.

Equality and diversity are promoted and reinforced well with data used effectively to ensure the needs of specific groups are accommodated. The small number of families with Polish and Portuguese as their first language improve their English language skills through attendance at the centre. Opportunities for parents to attend adult education classes or take part in Family Learning in order to improve their functional skills or increase their likelihood of gaining sustainable employment are extremely limited; the nearest further education college is inaccessible to most families without their own transport. The centre is reinstating an information technology suite once major building works are completed. However, despite the limitations, the centre makes good use of available resources and initiatives to encourage and support parents into work. The number of parents taking part in centre-devised programmes, including 'The Incredible Years' programme, Somerset Total Communication, the volunteer programme and other activities to increase confidence, motivation and employability, increased significantly in 2011. Many parents are now feeling more positive about progressing into work as a result of their experiences at the centre.

The very strong focus on the welfare, safety and protection of all children and families is reflected in the good safeguarding arrangements. Staff are knowledgeable and confident when discussing safeguarding and ensure that volunteers, new staff and families understand what is involved in keeping children and each other safe.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Widen the use of available data and parent feedback to improve the scrutiny and challenge by the advisory board and to ensure that target setting fully responds to the developing needs of children, families and the centre's further development needs.
- Further develop opportunities for parents to access formal and informal learning in order to improve their functional skills, increase confidence and improve the likelihood of gaining sustainable employment

How good are outcomes for families?

2

The wide range of activities and good support given is of great benefit to families. The very strong involvement with health visitors ensures that those in the greatest need are referred quickly and efficiently to the centre and responses from centre staff are swift and effective. The breastfeeding continuation rates at six to eight weeks are above the county and national rates. The peer-to-peer breastfeeding support group is successful in providing practical and emotional support once breastfeeding has started. Local data indicate that the obesity rate in primary school Reception classes increased in 2011. The centre responded well by further promoting activities to encourage movement, exercise and the use of wider community sport and leisure facilities. The supported swimming sessions and buggy walks around the grounds of the Stourhead estate are very popular. Family participation in health-related activities increased significantly in 2011/12 with over 100 taking part in the swimming sessions and 50 taking part in the buggy walks.

The well-resourced kitchen encourages healthy eating and gives parents the confidence and skills to use fresh produce and follow simple nutritious recipes. For many parents, the imaginative and sensitive manner in which the sessions are run inspires them to use their newly acquired skills at home. Young Parents Together sessions help young parents develop friendship groups, experience new creative activities and make them aware of the wider services and support available. The 'Mums 4 Mums' sessions are particularly successful in helping mothers of babies or pre-school children who feel isolated, unwell or under pressure by providing excellent staff and peer support, play activities and practical suggestions for managing a young family. Some mothers who benefited from the sessions now volunteer to help at the group.

A culture of safety and well-being across the centre is promoted and reinforced well. During planned activities, staff use effective strategies to develop parents' practical awareness of safety and how to minimise potential risks. Parents have a high level of trust in staff and feel very confident that any concerns they share or advice they seek will be dealt with in a positive and respectful manner. Some parents reported that the exceptional support they received from staff outside of normal working hours enabled them to manage a difficult or potentially dangerous situation at home. The highly effective, close working between centre staff and health visitors ensures the early identification of vulnerable families so that appropriate support and interventions can be offered quickly. Children on child protection plans are well supported by centre staff and other professionals, particularly through the monthly Healthy Child meetings. Appropriate use is made of the Common Assessment Framework to establish children's level of need, particularly through the Multi-agency Identification and Support in the Early Years (MAISEY) meetings.

Throughout the centre, there is a sense of fun and purposeful activity. The development of good parenting skills is high priority for the centre with new and imaginative ways to improve these skills considered regularly. Staff are highly skilled in motivating parents to engage in purposeful activity with their children, offering

advice and encouragement without being authoritarian. Activities are adapted to meet the needs and circumstances of families and offer a good balance between stimulus and challenge. For families with children with learning difficulties, the excellent use of Somerset Total Communication (STC) has, in many cases, reduced parents' frustration and anxieties and provided a good structure to support their children's communication development at home. One parent said that as a result of the support of the centre, "I now have a child who sleeps, cleans her teeth without being asked to and doesn't continually challenge me. I have a future."

Good use is made of specialist partners and agencies to provide advice on welfare benefits, money management and legal problems. Public transport links with main locations providing employment and careers development advice are poor. Although the centre displays local job vacancies, there is insufficient promotion of the National Careers Service face-to-face or telephone service. The recently introduced 'Job Done!' programme is beginning to have a significant impact on progression into employment. This programme has already exceeded the targets set for participation and employment with 10 parents taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the course and three already progressing to paid employment. Two parents who intend to become self-employed value the support and guidance from the highly skilled tutor and find the practical advice given by very experienced volunteers essential in planning, costing and resourcing their proposed businesses. Other activities such as the wide range of non-accredited courses and the highly successful volunteer programme involve at least a third of families using the centre. However, opportunities for parents to access training that will lead to qualifications and assist them in finding employment are very restricted due to the poor transport links and limited presence of an adult education or training provider in the town. The centre manager works well with South Somerset District Council to identify actions that will improve the employment prospects of parents in the area, although the loss of two major local employers, and a large number of new houses recently completed, has made finding employment difficult, particularly for those with low levels of skills.

Links with pre-school and primary school provision in the Wincanton area are excellent. Where necessary, very good support is provided to ensure the transition to the following phase is a smooth and positive experience. Achievement across the Early Years Foundation Stage is improving and the proportion of children achieving a good level of development is now above the national average. In 2011, the local authority data show the gap between the lowest achieving 20% and others is higher than the national average. The writing support project provided by the centre teacher to one group of boys entering the Reception class of a local primary school was outstanding. This group of seven boys was identified as having poor, or in some cases no, pre-writing skills. By the end of the project, the boys made significant progress, giving them the same level of skills as the majority of the children in their class. Subsequently, the centre teacher ran highly successful staff development activities for local school and pre-school teachers.

Parent involvement in the running of the centre and the determining of activities is improving and is now good. Centre staff always welcome feedback and suggested improvements. However, a more structured approach to collecting and evaluating

this information is necessary if full use is to be made of the parents' views. The recently introduced Feed and Feedback meeting before the advisory board meetings provides a valuable forum for parents to express their opinions on the quality of the service.

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	2

How good is the provision?

2

The good provision offered by the centre is supported by strong identification of the needs of families in the reach area by the use of available data, discussions with other professionals and by good engagement with local families. All relevant staff know the families they work with very well. The initial assessment of individual and family needs is good and improving further following the recent training. Staff now have a more focused approach to recording observations of children and families that visit the centre. As a result of the assessment and subsequent interventions, the majority of parents can clearly identify how their parenting skills, confidence and self-esteem have improved, in many cases significantly. Some very hard to reach, vulnerable families are still not fully engaged in the services provided by the centre and those in the most rural areas without their own transport find it very difficult to travel to Wincanton. The centre is aware of this lack of involvement and intends to recruit an additional worker to improve the contact with families in the surrounding villages and those currently reluctant to engage but still in need of support.

Partnership working with health visitors is outstanding; this contributes to the good participation rates achieved by the centre, with the number of individuals using the centre increasing by 7% since 2010/11. The centre is highly responsive to requests and suggestions and will adapt and extend programmes according to individual and group feedback and the needs of the children. For example, one group who started out as part of the Young Mums group wanted to maintain the support network developed even though they no longer met the age eligibility, and the centre responded by allowing them to continue to meet as a group as well as supporting

and encouraging individually into groups and activities.

The use of volunteers to support the work of the centre is outstanding. The wide range of volunteers used brings exceptional expertise, experience and knowledge to the centre. Many volunteers were originally users of the centre and progressed to either The Balsam Centre or other organisations. The recently appointed volunteer coordinator has been instrumental in encouraging the wider community to make use of the healthy living centre and adding value to the provision offered by the children's 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

The trustees and the advisory board members play a highly effective role in ensuring that the quality of provision effectively meets the needs of children and families in the reach group. Financial oversight is good and the links between strategic planning and operational delivery ensure the children's centre makes excellent use of the available resources within the centre and maximises opportunities for additional project funding. Strong performance management contributes to the recent improvements in the number of children and families using the centre and the range and variety of activities offered.

Leaders and managers know their provision well. Self-evaluation is thorough and comprehensive, covering the diverse range of the centre. The views of users and other partners are used to inform judgements on the effectiveness of the service. However, much of the self-evaluation is descriptive and fails to make clear the impact the service has on the lives of children and families. The business plan identifies the key improvements needed to maintain and further develop the good quality of provision but does not make effective use of the available data to set measurable targets that will help managers know when they are successful.

The use of resources to provide opportunities for families to improve their parenting skills, develop healthier lifestyles, overcome social isolation and improve their mental well-being is outstanding. Staff are innovative and creative, making excellent use of the facilities and resources of the wider healthy living centre including the Growing Space horticultural provision, the community garden, café and surrounding environment. The exceptional use of partnerships has a positive impact on the lives of children and families with the centre playing a key role in ensuring the wider needs of centre users are fully understood by partners. In particular, the high level of

cooperation between health, education, social care and centre professionals ensures actions are responsive, effective and coordinated.

The centre promotes a strong culture of mutual respect and valuing of individual differences. Discrimination or oppressive behaviour is tackled decisively. A particularly strong feature of the centre is the approach used to encourage a tolerance and understanding of mental ill health. The therapeutic and practical approach to improving mental health developed by the healthy living centre has helped children's centre staff respond positively and appropriately to centre users with poor mental health.

The needs of families and children using the services of the centre are strongly supported by the high priority given to safeguarding. All staff and volunteers are subject to enhanced Criminal Records Bureau checks and the recommended practice in the selection and recruitment of staff is followed. Training in safeguarding is good and highly relevant, and staff are advised of any changes or examples of effective practice as they arise. The centre and its partners work collaboratively to ensure any safeguarding actions are effective and in the best interests of children. The minor safeguarding concern regarding signage raised by inspectors was rectified immediately.

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	1
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	1
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

None

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Balsam Children's Centre on 24 and 25 October 2012. We judged the centre as good overall. During the inspection, we talked to parents, staff, volunteers, partners and representatives of the local authority linked to the centre. We would like to thank those of you who told us what you liked about the centre and the improvements you would like to see.

The children's centre plays an important part in the lives of many families in the area and we found that it makes good provision for the children and families that use it. Many of you are learning new skills, feel more confident about being a parent and enjoy making new friends through the activities provided by the centre. You appreciate and value the activities to help keep you healthy; in particular, you enjoy the swimming, cookery sessions and buggy walks around Stourhead. Your children benefit from attending the centre with many of them becoming more sociable, communicative and able to play more constructively. Families with children with additional needs feel the staff assist them greatly in understanding what they need to do to support their children and help them develop. Many parents are starting to think about the skills they will need when they start to look for work; this is an area the centre is keen to help you with. We asked the centre to look closely at what it can do to give you the best possible start when you are ready you return to work.

The centre leaders run the centre well. They make sure that all staff have good training and keep up to date with new developments. They listen to what you say about how well the centre is run and the changes you would like to see. We asked them to make even better use of the views you express in their planning for the future and the advisory board's evaluation of how well the centre is meeting the needs of you and your children.

Centre staff work very well with partners, such as the health visitors and other organisations that operate from The Balsam Healthy Living Centre. Parents and other members of the local community make very good use of the opportunities provided by The Balsam Healthy Living Centre such as the Growing Space community garden, the regular country market and the chance to become a volunteer at the centre. We were impressed with how many of you have become volunteers in the children's centre and in particular the way you used your experiences and expertise to support new parents and families new to the area.

Thank you for your contribution to the inspection and we wish you every success for the future.

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