

# Bramble Hill Children's Centre

Mill Close, Buntingford, Hertfordshire, SG9 9SZ

## Inspection dates

16–17 January 2014

Overall effectiveness	This inspection:	Good	2
	Previous inspection:	Not previously inspected	
Access to services by young children and families		Good	2
The quality of practice and services		Good	2
The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management		Good	2

## Summary of key findings for children and families

### This is a good centre.

- Most families with children under five are registered with the centre, and a large majority use and greatly value the centre's services.
- Good relationships with a range of partners, and particularly health visitors, help the centre to identify families who might benefit from its services. The centre plays an important role in meeting their needs and reducing inequalities within the community.
- By holding activities in locations spread across its area, the centre ensures that as many families as possible can access its services.
- The centre is seen as a place where parents can go for good-quality, caring advice and guidance. Many parents refer to the centre as a 'lifeline' and say how much their lives have improved because of the help they have received.
- The centre is led and managed well, and makes good use of its limited resources. Staff are caring and supportive, and work well together.
- The local authority and lead agency keep careful oversight of the centre's work and provide good support for the centre's staff.
- Within a relatively short space of time, the centre has become a vital hub for the local community as it has expanded and improved its services. The centre is held in high esteem by the local council, the local community and the partners with whom it works.

### It is not outstanding because:

- There are still some families with young children who have not registered with the centre and a quarter do not make use of the centre's services.
- The centre does not make enough use of volunteers to contribute to the centre's activities.
- The advisory board does not challenge the centre enough or hold staff to account.
- The centre does not have procedures to evaluate the long-term impact of its services or to identify where timely intervention might prevent problems from escalating.

## Information about this inspection

The inspection of this children's centre was carried out under Part 3A of the Childcare Act 2006 as amended by the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009.

This inspection was carried out by two Additional Inspectors.

The inspectors held meetings with: representatives from the local authority, YMCA Central Herts and the local advisory board; the centre manager; the staff of the children's centre; various groups of parents and other users of the centre; and representatives of organisations who work in partnership with the centre.

The inspectors visited activities taking place at the centre and at a number of outlying venues during the two days of the inspection.

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

## Inspection team

Graham Sims, Lead inspector

Additional Inspector

Anthony Mundy

Additional Inspector

## Full report

### Information about the centre

Bramble Hill Children's Centre is one of 10 children's centres in East Hertfordshire and one of four run by YMCA Central Herts on behalf of the local authority. Governance of the centre is shared between the local authority, YMCA Central Herts and the centre's advisory board. Day-to-day management is the responsibility of the centre manager, who oversees the work of a relatively small team of staff.

Bramble Hill is a phase three centre which started providing services in the summer of 2009. It occupies its own premises which are an extension of the Seth Ward Community Centre. Accommodation at the centre is limited to a small meeting room and an administrative office. Most activities and services take place at other venues across the centre's reach area.

The centre fulfils its core purpose by offering a range of services for families, by working with health visitors and partner organisations, and by referring parents and children to other specialist providers. The centre does not provide nursery education or day care facilities for young children.

The centre serves a large rural area centred on the town of Buntingford. An estimated 650 children under the age of five live in the area. Most of families are White British. Although there are small pockets of deprivation, the centre serves one of the least deprived areas of the county. Levels of unemployment and the proportion of families dependent on benefits are below the national average.

Children's skills, knowledge and abilities on entry to early years provision are generally above those which are typical for their age.

The centre has identified its key target groups as lone parents, workless or low-income households, those who are involved with social care, and families where there are mental health issues, drug or alcohol problems, or domestic violence.

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

- Devise effective and innovative ways of ensuring every family with a young child registers with the centre and an even greater proportion than at present use its services.
- Make greater use of the expertise and experience of parents living in the area to contribute as volunteers to the centre's activities and to provide additional support and guidance for other families.
- Ensure that the advisory board provides a greater level of challenge for the centre's leaders and is more rigorous in holding them to account for the centre's performance.
- Work with the local authority and YMCA Central Herts to devise procedures which will enable it to evaluate the longer-term impact of its services and to identify where earlier intervention might help some families avoid future crises and costly additional support.

## Inspection judgements

### Access to services by young children and families

**Good**

- Most families with children under the age of five are registered with the centre, and a large majority of these families attend activities and services which are organised or brokered by the centre. Excellent relationships with health visitors ensure that all families who have had a new child are informed about the work of the centre.
- Data provided by the local authority keep the centre informed of emerging trends and needs within the area. The receipt of information about new births, regular contact with a wide range of partners, early years settings and schools, and the attendance of many families at stay-and-play sessions help the centre to get to know parents and their young children well. In partnership with other professionals, staff use this information to identify families who might benefit from the centre's services.
- The centre is assiduous in following up any family which has been referred to it or where specific needs have been identified. As a result of this effective outreach work, almost every such family engages with the centre, which thus plays an active role in reducing inequalities and improving the health, safety and educational opportunities for the most needy families.
- By holding many of its activities in locations spread across its area, the centre ensures that families who live in rural areas and do not have transport can access the centre's services. Activities, such as stay-and-play sessions, are well attended and parents are unanimous in their appreciation of the services provided.
- The centre ensures that all families who are eligible to receive funding for their two-year-old children to attend nursery are informed about the settings available and the procedures for securing places. As a result, all eligible two-year-old children access good-quality nursery education.
- The centre contacts families who have not registered their children and sends out information about its work. However, it has yet to devise innovative and persuasive ways of engaging the 15% of families who have not registered their children or the 25% who are registered but do not attend activities.

### The quality of practice and services

**Good**

- The centre provides a wide range of good-quality stay-and-play sessions which any parent with a child of the appropriate age can attend. Parents greatly appreciate the opportunity to meet other parents. Many commented to inspectors that the sessions have a positive impact on their children's social development and help them as parents to discover different ways of interacting with their children.
- Regularly held activities, such as baby sensory and baby signing classes, and occasional one-off workshops on themes such as first aid, pottery and photography, help parents to develop new skills. They also establish excellent relationships between families and the centre staff, so that the centre has become a vital hub for the local community and a place where parents can go for advice and help.
- Case studies and discussions with parents show that the centre has a major impact on the lives of families who have been referred to it for specific help or particular needs. In this way, it makes an important contribution to reducing inequalities. The quality of care, guidance and support provided by the staff is excellent. Families who need additional help are visited regularly or are referred to

other professionals who can provide specialist support. Parents talk about the centre being a 'lifeline' and say how much their lives have changed as a result of the help received.

- The impact of the centre's work is reflected in figures which show an above-average proportion of mothers breastfeeding their babies, a below-average proportion of five-year-olds who are obese and a good health-and-safety record as reflected in emergency admissions to hospitals.
- Increasingly good relationships with schools and the support provided for early years settings are having a good impact on preparing children to start their education. This is reflected in the fact that the proportion of children reaching a good level of development by the age of five is well above the national average.
- A small number of volunteers help run some of the centre's sessions. However, the centre has yet to explore ways of making greater use of volunteers who could use their expertise or previous experience to provide specific support for other parents or contribute more widely to the centre's activities.

### **The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management**

### **Good**

- The centre is led and managed well. In a relatively short space of time, it has expanded and improved its services, which are held in high esteem by the local council, by the local community and by the partners with which it works.
- The small, but dedicated and caring team of professionals have a good knowledge and understanding of the area and have established excellent relationships within the community. Staff are supervised well. There is an excellent sense of teamwork, and staff willingly support and help each other.
- The centre uses its limited resources efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of the area, paying particular attention to the needs of those living in rural areas who cannot easily access the centre. Staff manage the small space available at the centre well, although the lack of additional rooms restricts the range of services which can be provided at the centre and makes working conditions difficult at times for the staff. The centre has, however, been resourceful in procuring the use of other venues for activities and has excellent relationships with the neighbouring community centre.
- The local authority and YMCA Central Herts provide good governance. Senior staff from these organisations have a good understanding of the needs of the area and what happens at the centre. Through data provided by the local authority, which is specific to families living in the centre's area, they have a good understanding of how well the centre is performing and how effective it is in reducing inequalities for children and families.
- The centre's performance is reviewed termly, in detail and with insight, by the local authority. YMCA Central Herts provides good support and essential backup for the centre, and makes staff aware of good practice which is happening elsewhere. A range of partners and parents provide supportive advice and encouragement through the work of the advisory board. However, the advisory board is not yet rigorous enough in challenging the centre or holding it to account for its performance.
- The centre has thorough and effective policies and practices for safeguarding children and parents. All staff, and partners who work with and through the centre, undergo checks to ensure they are suitable to work with children. There are good working relationships with other agencies and partners, thus providing a wide network of professionals who are there to identify any concerns regarding the safety of parents and children. There is good collaboration in discussing and then

meeting the needs of children subject to child protection plans, looked after children and those who have been assessed under the Common Assessment Framework.

- The centre has a realistic evaluation of its own performance. Through regular feedback, it knows what parents think of the services it offers, and through its detailed records and fortnightly reviews of families in need, it is aware of the impact of the support provided by the centre staff and other agencies. The centre does not yet, however, have procedures which enable it to evaluate and record the longer-term impact its services or to identify where timely intervention might help some families avoid future crises and costly additional support.

## What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	Practice consistently reflects the highest aspirations for children and their families and, as a result, inequalities are reducing rapidly and gaps are closing.
Grade 2	Good	Practice enables most children and their families to access good quality services that improve children's wellbeing and achieve the stated outcomes for families.
Grade 3	Requires improvement	Performance is not as good as it might reasonably be expected to be in one or more key areas.
Grade 4	Inadequate	The needs of children and families in its area are not being met and/or the leaders and managers are not providing sufficient challenge to bring about improvement to the quality of services.

## Centre details

<b>Unique reference number</b>	21068
<b>Local authority</b>	Hertfordshire
<b>Inspection number</b>	430198
<b>Managed by</b>	YMCA on behalf of the local authority

<b>Approximate number of children under five in the reach area</b>	665
<b>Centre leader</b>	Mandy Sims
<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	Not previously inspected
<b>Telephone number</b>	01763 273008
<b>Email address</b>	mandy.sims@ymcacentralherts.org.uk



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