

Harpenden Children's Centres

Batford Early Years Centre, Holcroft Road, Harpenden, Hertfordshire, AL5 5BQ

Inspection dates 27–28 March 2014

Overall effectiveness	This inspection:	Outstanding	1
	Previous inspection:	Not previously inspected	
Access to services by young children and families		Outstanding	1
The quality of practice and services		Outstanding	1
The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management		Outstanding	1

Summary of key findings for children and families

This children's centre group is outstanding.

- Excellent partnership arrangements with health services and others ensure that all parents with new children are informed about the centres' services, resulting in the very large majority of families with children under the age of five registering with the centres.
- Information from the centres' partners help staff to identify 'priority families' who might benefit from their services. The centres provide meaningful support for almost all of their priority families and welcome all other families to use their services.
- The centres are highly successful in ensuring as many two- to four-year-old children as possible access high-quality nursery education and enter school much better prepared than in many areas of the country.
- The centres provide high-quality services and courses which have a major impact on reducing inequalities and contribute to health outcomes which are better than in most areas of the country.
- The centres' staff provide helpful courses and excellent support and guidance which help parents to improve their family circumstances and their parenting skills. However, the centres' role in promoting English, mathematics and vocational learning is underdeveloped.
- The centres are led and managed extremely well and are continually improving. Staff are highly proficient, have an excellent knowledge of the local area and collaborate extremely well with a wide range of partners to ensure the needs of priority families are met.
- The local authority, the governing body of Batford Early Years Centre, the advisory board, the parents' forum and multi-agency group all play an important role in ensuring the centres are run well, meet challenging targets and continue to develop the most appropriate services for the area.
- Staff are very good at sharing and receiving information from their various partners which is used to support and help families. However, the system for maintaining case file notes and records of this information is not particularly efficient.
- The centres place a high priority on ensuring the health and safety of families and work very well with various partner organisations to safeguard children.
- All who work with the centres are full of praise for the cooperation and support they receive from the centres. Parents who receive support are highly appreciative of the way staff have helped them to change their family circumstances for the better and to improve the lives of their children.

Information about this inspection

The inspection of this children's centre group was carried out under Part 3A of the Childcare Act 2006 as amended by the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009. The centres that form part of this children's centre group are Harpenden Children's Centre and Harpenden Children's Centre at Southdown.

This inspection was carried out by three Additional Inspectors.

The inspectors held meetings with: a representative from the local authority; members of the governing body of Batford Early Years Centre and the advisory board; the manager and staff of the children's centres; and representatives of organisations who work in partnership with the centres. Parents' views of the centres were gathered through: discussion with a group of parents; talking to those attending activities or visiting the centres; parents' evaluations of activities they had attended; and scrutiny of the results of the local authority's survey of parents' views.

The inspectors visited activities taking place at the two centres during the two days of the inspection. These included 'Little Larks' nursery provision for two-year-olds, a childminder group, 'Hedgehogs Toddler Group', 'Baby and Toddler Weigh and Play', and the toy library.

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

Inspection team

Graham Sims, Lead inspector	Additional Inspector
Geoffrey Dorrity	Additional Inspector
Peter Towner	Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about the group

The town of Harpenden is served by two children's centres: Harpenden Children's Centre, a phase two centre which opened in 2008, and Harpenden Children's Centre at Southdown, a phase three centre which opened in 2010. The two centres are run as a single entity and are known locally and by the local authority as Harpenden Children's Centres. Harpenden Children's Centre is located at Batford Early Years Centre whose facilities it shares with Batford Nursery (URN117068) and Skylarks Day Care (EY301868). Both of these organisations have been inspected separately and their reports can be found at www.ofsted.gov.uk. Batford acts as the main hub for the two centres and provides a base for staff. Harpenden Children's Centre at Southdown has two rooms in a building used by health visitors on the southern outskirts of the town.

The centres serve a large and relatively affluent area in which there are small pockets of deprivation. Around 2300 children under the age of five live in the area. Levels of unemployment and the proportion of families dependent on benefits are below the national average. A large majority of families in the area are White British.

The local authority has delegated responsibility for governance of the children's centres to the governing body of Batford Early Years Centre. The governing body receives advice and guidance from an advisory board, to which a parents' forum and a multi-agency group also contribute their views. A manager is responsible for the day-to-day running of the two centres, but works in close conjunction with, and is supervised by, the headteacher of Batford Nursery, which is the lead agency.

The centre has a relatively small staff team which includes the manager, a children's centre coordinator, an outreach worker, an administrative officer and a data administrator. The centre also employs three other staff who help to run Little Larks: this is a joint venture between the children's centre and Skylarks, which is managed by the manager of Skylarks, and provides nursery education for two-year-old children.

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, who provide care and nursery education for young children.

Children's skills, knowledge and abilities on entry to early years provision vary widely, but are generally typical for their age.

The centre has identified its key target groups, which it refers to as 'priority families', as: parents who have mental health problems, suffer anxiety or depression or are subject to domestic abuse; lone parents who are new to Harpenden or have been re-housed; low-income households; those living in overcrowded or sub-standard housing; those who are involved with social care or other support agencies.

What does the group need to do to improve further?

- Develop further opportunities for the small proportion of adults who are out of work to improve essential skills in mathematics and English and to undertake relevant vocational learning to help them back into employment.
- Devise more efficient and effective ways of maintaining case file notes and records of conversations and explore ways in which such information may be shared and transferred electronically.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Outstanding

- The proportion of families registering with the centres continues to grow as a result of the centres' concerted drive to get to know of every family with young children in the area. Almost every family receiving child benefit for a child under the age of five is registered with the centres. In three of the four most deprived areas, every family is registered.
- Receipt of live birth data and the excellent collaboration with midwives and health visitors keep the centres fully informed about the 30 or so babies born in the area each month. Very good communication with a wide range of partners also informs the centres of the 14 or so children who move into the area each month. All of the centres' partners inform parents of the centres' services and obtain families' consent to be contacted. Families who do not then register with the centres receive a visit from one of the staff to ensure that they are fully aware of what the centres have to offer.
- The centres use all of their contacts to identify any family who might benefit from their services. Over the last year, the large majority of these priority families have accessed services at the centres. The centres are providing meaningful support for every family in many of their priority groups, such as young mothers, those suffering domestic violence, and families with children who are supported by other agencies.
- While the centres focus their attention on and give priority to those families with the greatest needs, all families are welcome to participate in the centres' activities. Courses are kept deliberately short, and most are repeated frequently during the year to make it as easy as possible for parents to attend. For example, well-attended first-aid and postnatal courses take place every month. Courses take place at times which are most convenient for parents. Some, for example have taken place in the evening, others at weekends. The centres listen to the views of parents and have recently trialled a new course, 'Time Together', to provide specific support and encouragement for those who are new to the area, those who are isolated and those who would benefit from peer support.
- The centres are assiduous in encouraging families to access nursery education for their children. The centres use their strong links with childminders, local toddler groups and early years providers, as well as the outstanding co-located nursery provision and day care facilities at Batford Early Years Centre, to direct parents to first-class nursery provision. As a result of the centres' efforts, all families who have two-year-old children who are eligible for funded nursery places take up the offer, and almost every three- and four-year-old child accesses nursery education.

The quality of practice and services

Outstanding

- Excellent partnership working with a wide range of early years providers, voluntary organisations and health services ensure that families receive high-quality services which have a major impact on reducing inequalities and improving the quality of life for all families who engage with the centres.
- Health outcomes are significantly better than in most areas of the country. Promotion of breastfeeding within the centres and partnership with the National Childbirth Trust result in the proportion of mothers breastfeeding their children at six to eight weeks being well above the national average. The level of childhood obesity is lower than in most parts of the country. Postnatal, baby massage, feeding for under fives, first aid and e-safety courses, all with good levels of attendance, promote health and safety issues extremely well.
- Educational outcomes for young children are excellent. Despite wide variations in children's skills

when they enter early years provision, the differences are almost eradicated by the end of Early Years Foundation Stage, and a far higher proportion of children reach a good level of development than is the case in most parts of the county or nationally. Schools and early years providers say that the children's centres' involvement in encouraging families to access high-quality education is crucial. The centres' staff, although operating under the jurisdiction of the day care centre, make a major contribution to the funded education for two-year-old children.

- Parents who have been referred to the centres and who receive a range of additional targeted support through courses, working with partners or visits from the centres' outreach workers have nothing but the highest praise for the support they have received. The centres' input has helped them to overcome issues such as postnatal depression, to deal with abusive relationships, to gain a much better understanding of how their children develop, and to improve their parenting skills. They say that staff are always there to help them, that no time is wasted in sorting out difficulties, and that staff will go out of their way to provide whatever support is needed. Staff have also been instrumental in helping families to resolve issues with accommodation.
- The centres provide many opportunities for parents to improve their parenting skills. A course to help parents understand the development of boys has been particularly successful. A number of parents act as volunteers and gain experience which for some has acted as a springboard back into employment. However, the centres' role in helping the relatively small number of adults seeking a return to employment by improving essential skills in mathematics and English or acquiring vocational skills is underdeveloped.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

Outstanding

- The centres are led and managed extremely well. There is an unremitting drive to provide high-quality services for the centres' priority families, while not neglecting to provide services which any family can attend.
- Staff have an excellent knowledge of the local area and the families who live there. Collaboration with a wide range of partners is excellent and ensures that families have immediate access to the services which are most appropriate to their needs.
- Governance arrangements are highly effective and contribute in no small measure to the centres' success and continual improvement. The local authority reviews the centres' performance termly, and the challenging targets and insightful advice have been instrumental in bringing improvement. Designated members of the governing body of Batford Early Years Centre keep a careful check on what is happening in the centre and what progress is being made with areas for development. They are highly effective in holding staff to account and contribute well to discussions on future development.
- The advisory board provides a further level of well-informed challenge. A parents' forum and multi-agency group also meet regularly and make valuable contributions to the planning and development of the centres.
- The centres prioritise their use of resources very effectively, ensuring that staff time is spent as much as possible in dealing with priority families, while still offering a friendly and helpful service to any who wish to use the centres' services. Charges made for courses supplement the centres' income which increases the scope of what the centres can offer. No families are disadvantaged by this policy because subsidised or free places are available for any who cannot afford the full cost. Great emphasis is placed on ensuring as many children as possible receive high-quality nursery education.

- Staff are very good at sharing and receiving information from other partners, but the system for maintaining case file notes and records of conversations on paper is inefficient and precludes easy electronic transfer of information. At the time of the inspection, a new data management system was being introduced to provide the centre with even better information about its families and to help staff ensure that no family who could benefit from the centres' support slips through the net.
- The centres take all the necessary steps to safeguard children and parents. Many of the courses run by the centres or their partners place a strong emphasis on safety. Excellent relationships with health and social services ensure joined-up provision for families in need, especially those with children subject to child protection plans, looked after children, children identified as in need or those who have been assessed under the Common Assessment Framework. In many cases, the centres' intervention and support result in improved home circumstances and a de-escalation from the highest levels of concern.
- The centres are highly reflective of their own practice and ensure that all those involved in governance, the wide range of partners, staff and users of the centre contribute to evaluation of the centres and to development plans for the future. Services are changed or adapted according to the feedback received, and new services, such as 'Time Together, are trialled and evaluated rigorously before becoming part of the established programme.

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.

Children's centre group details

Unique reference number	80289
Local authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	434487
Managed by	Batford Early Years Centre on behalf of the local authority

Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	2300
Group manager	Pat Everett
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Telephone number	01582 713872
Email address	manager.harpenden@hertschildrenscentres.org.uk

This group consists of the following children's centres:

- Batford Children's Centre
- Southdown Children's Centre

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