

The Brambles Children's Centre Group

c/o Brambles Children's Centre, Budes Gardens, Wokingham, RG40 1PX

Inspection dates

22–23 July 2014

Not previously inspected

Overall effectiveness	This inspection: Previous inspection:	Requires improvement	3
Access to services by young children and families		Requires improvement	3
The quality of practice and services		Requires improvement	3
The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management		Requires improvement	3

Summary of key findings for children and families

This group of centres requires improvement. It is not good because:

- Too few target children and families sustain engagement in the centre group's services. There is a shortfall of information about workless families that makes it hard for leaders to assess the needs of this small but significant group.
- The local authority and health partners do not always share information in a timely manner; this limits the group's ability to accurately prioritise its services and demonstrate the impact of its work.
- There are signs that outcomes at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage are improving. However, the centre is not working proactively enough with early years partners to support children's learning, especially that of vulnerable two year olds.
- There is limited tracking of children's progress at centre-run sessions, and no systematic approach to finding out how well parents get on when they are signposted to education, skills or training courses. The range of opportunities available to enhance parents' employability is too narrow.
- The two newly established partnership boards are developing their support and challenge roles but have yet to elect an independent chair. Until very recently the local authority has not given sufficient focus to monitoring the group's all-round performance.
- The links between supervision, training and setting targets for staff, are not strong enough.

It has the following strengths:

- Leaders have a very realistic picture of the group's strengths and weaknesses. They have set clear priorities for making improvement and things are on the move.
- Good quality, well-targeted outreach services, such as those provided for army families and those with Gypsy, Roma, Traveller heritage, help reduce inequalities and break down cultural barriers.
- Safeguarding of children is central to the group's work. Strong partnerships and the sharing

of information about families in need help to keep children safe. Case files are of a good standard.

- Parents have a strong voice in helping shape the group's services. Children express their views using 'leaves' placed on the 'Talking and feelings tree', which capture their views.

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

- Work with the local authority and health partners to ensure that information is sufficient to:
 - assess local needs and shape appropriate services
 - increase the engagement of target groups, particularly young and workless families.
- With partners, develop effective checking and tracking systems to show the impact of services on children's learning, particularly for two year olds.
- Enhance the opportunities to extend parents' education, learning and work-based skills, and establish a way of checking the progress of those signposted to partner services.
- Strengthen governance by moving swiftly to elect an independent chair of the partnership boards.
- Ensure that there is a clearly recorded focus on performance and outcomes in the local authority's monitoring.
- Tighten the links between staff supervision, performance targets and training.

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. The centres that form part of this children's centre group are Brambles Children's Centre and Finchampstead Children's Centre.

This inspection was carried out by three Additional inspectors.

The inspectors held meetings with the centre manager, staff, local authority officers, partners, parents and members of the partnership boards.

The inspectors visited a number of activities held in both centres and at other venues, including the mobile children's centre.

Inspectors took into account parents' views as expressed directly to them during the inspection, as well as through their recorded evaluations about the centre's work.

Inspectors also looked at a wide range of relevant documentation.

Inspection team

Christine Field, Lead inspector	Additional Inspector
Aileen King	Additional Inspector
Susan Metcalfe	Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about the centre

The Brambles Children's Centre Group includes two children's centres: Brambles and Finchampstead. They opened in 2008 and 2010 respectively, and were brought together as a group in 2013. The group is managed by Wokingham local authority. Each centre has a separate partnership board and there is a borough-wide, strategic advisory board. The group operates a 'roaming' parents' consultation forum. The group manager has responsibility for the day-to-day operations of both centres, together with the line management of a team of family workers. Children's centres are now part of the Children's Social Care division within Wokingham Children's Services. There are two other children's centre groups within the locality: The Red Kite and Ambleside.

Brambles Children's Centre is located on the old site of Keep Hatch Infant School, in the heart of Norreys estate. This is one of the centre's least advantaged communities, which includes private and social housing. Finchampstead Children's Centre is located within a purpose-built community centre, which is managed and owned by Finchampstead Baptist Church (FBC). FBC also houses a range of other community organisations, including the library. The community the group serves has a number of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community sites and also has an army base.

There are 2,285 children under five years of age living in the group's reach area. Most children are from White British backgrounds, although the number of minority ethnic families is increasing. Almost one in four children live in households where no one is working or is on a low income; this is almost three times the borough average. Children's skills on entry to early education vary, but overall are at the level expected for their age.

The group delivers a range of services from a variety of venues, for families and children under five years, such as family support, adult learning and health services.

Priority groups have been identified as: two year olds eligible for free education; children living in low income or workless households; children supported by Children's Social Care; Gypsy, Roma Traveller families; army families; children living with domestic abuse; and parents with mental health issues.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Requires improvement

- Registrations are rising due to the group's effective marketing and most families (84%) are signed up for services. The centre group has had contact with the majority of families over the past year. Currently, however, too few young parents and families on low incomes or who are workless use the group's services. The absence of baseline information about workless families makes it hard to assess their needs, shape appropriate services and drive increased access for this priority group.
- The centre does not routinely receive live birth information from the health authority. It has to rely heavily on local partnerships to gather what information it can about families with new babies. For example, the midwifery team are making referrals concerning expectant mothers at the 12 week ante-natal appointment stage, which helps to provide appropriate support. Health visitor child development clinics held at both Brambles and Finchampstead

- enable centre staff to have early contact with those families who come into the centres.
- At 80%, the proportion of eligible two year olds accessing their free education place is at the level seen nationally. The centre aims to meet regularly with education providers to see how well children who have accessed children centre services get on in their new setting. There are plans to share best practice, for example in developing 'learning journeys', but this is not yet happening.
 - All Gypsy, Roma, Traveller families living on the three sites served by the group are registered. A significant amount of family support work takes place, particularly with those experiencing isolation due to cultural barriers. The mobile children's centre bus visits the sites weekly and has contact with the large majority of young children. This supports children's learning and development and provides parents with timely advice on a range of family matters.
 - The group is currently supporting 11 children who are under the care of Children's Social Care, which is a high proportion of those across the borough. All children in need or subject to a child protection plan are registered and given early one-to-one help by the group's family support workers. The use of the Community House in Finchampstead enables the group to reach families in most need, some of whom are reluctant to access the centres directly.
 - Children living on the army base are in weekly contact with centre group services due to the effective activities which the centre staff organise at the garrison. Two local pre-schools work in good partnership with army families and centre staff to help parents prepare their children ready for school.

The quality of practice and services

Requires improvement

- Services open to everyone are appropriately located at various community venues. However, improvement is required to enable more families to access them. Leaders recognise that some parents are unsure about visiting the centres as they feel they do not fit in and this is being addressed.
- The local authority early years team is working effectively to increase the proportion of children achieving a good level of development. Information shows that about three quarters of children who have accessed children's centre services achieve well. However, it is not clear what part the group actually plays in this. This is because, although activity planning has clear learning intentions, evaluations rarely focus on these and instead centre staff record more general observations. As a result, the group cannot sufficiently demonstrate that all children make at least good progress.
- The range of the services available to improve employability is too narrow, particularly for workless parents. Also, when parents are signposted to courses their progress is not sufficiently tracked, which reduces leaders' ability to check the impact of services on improving equality.
- Partnership work ensures that families who most need support, including those experiencing domestic violence or suffering from mental health problems, receive well-coordinated early help. One-to-one support work is well focused on meeting assessed needs and its quality and impact are kept under close scrutiny by managers. Case files are maintained to a good standard. Staff are making increasingly effective use of a tool to capture how effective their support is in helping families get back on track.
- Staff work hard to build trusting relationships in this diverse community, and parents in receipt of family support told inspectors how friendly and non-judgemental the staff are. They value highly the help they receive at times of personal crisis. One mother's words sum up the views of many: 'Staff help me through my down days and are fantastic in following things up for me.'

- Parents' feedback shows that they are helped to improve their parenting skills by attending specific programmes. They also improve their child's well-being by undertaking first-aid courses and receiving advice, for example, about weaning and sleeping routines. The lack of information being shared with the group about what impact such activities have over time detracts from otherwise good quality partnerships.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

Requires improvement

- The centre manager has a firm grasp on what the group needs to do to improve its effectiveness and is directing resources effectively to bring this about. The self-evaluation form paints an accurate, if rather detailed, picture of where things are currently. Staff, some of whom are new to their post, are upbeat about the future and keen to play a full role in moving things forward.
- The local authority undertakes a range of useful monitoring activities. However, until very recently these have not had a sharp enough focus on checking the impact of the group's work. Appropriate improvement targets have been set in collaboration with the centre manager. However, these require still sharper focus by setting clear milestones to ensure the actions taken meet set deadlines. Local authority officers recognise the manager's frustrations about the timeliness and accuracy of information and are working to resolve the situation.
- Governance is developing, with four parents serving on the relatively new partnership boards which are building their support and challenge roles. An extensive range of partners are represented. The centre manager currently chairs meetings, and this is contrary to the board's terms of reference and compromises its impartiality.
- Supervision arrangements work well. However, opportunities are missed to review staff's individual performance targets, to explore centre priorities and to identify training needs.
- The centre group staff follow local safeguarding board procedures effectively. Staff vetting checks and training are up to date. There is a well-understood referral and early help process in place to support children in need, including those subject to a child protection plan. Procedures are used effectively to underpin the well-integrated multi-agency partnership work.
- Parents' views are regularly sought by the group by various means. Their feedback has resulted in changes such as extending the length of sessions or organising resources differently. Children also have the opportunity to influence practice. For example, their views are taken on board during activities, recorded on leaf-shaped cardboard and tied to the tree for everyone to see.

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 well-being 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 group details

Unique reference number	80674
Local authority	Wokingham
Inspection number	442838
Managed by	The local authority
Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	2,285
Centre leader	Beccy Franklin
Telephone number	01189 088010
Email address	Beccy.Franklin@wokingham.gov.uk

This group consists of the following children's centres:

- 20395 Brambles Children's Centre
- 21167 Finchampstead Children's Centre

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