

Inspection report for Battle Children's Centre

Local authority	East Sussex
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Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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Linked early years and childcare, if 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 representatives from a range of partner agencies and the local authority, frontline staff and members of the local advisory group. They observed the centre's work, looked at a range of relevant documentation, visited a number of community-based groups, and observed the work of the 'Fun Van'.

Information about the centre

Battle Children's Centre is one of six centres in the Rother area of East Sussex. It is a phase two centre which was designated in October 2007. It serves the town of Battle and surrounding villages including Catsfield, Crowhurst, Netherfield, Ninfield, Mountfield, Sedlescombe and Whatlington. Some services operate within the centre's building which is based on a school site. Many other services operate within the community at local venues and at other local children's centres. The reach area is mixed in terms of deprivation with a large proportion of affluent families. Around 13% of families are claiming out-of-work benefits. Residential areas consist of a majority of privately-owned homes with two small areas of predominantly social housing.

The majority of families in the reach area are of White British heritage with very small percentages of Eastern European and South East Asian families. Children's levels of skills and understanding on entry to school are about average for their age. At the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage around 66% of children achieve at least 78 points across the Early Years Foundation Stage, with communication, language and literacy the weaker area.

The centre provides the full core offer and works in partnership with a number of agencies. Governance arrangements are provided by the local authority. A local advisory group oversees the work of the three rural Rother centres. There is another

local advisory group for three other centres in the area and the minutes of the two groups' meetings are combined.

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

Battle Children's Centre is making a good contribution overall to improving outcomes for families. The centre's safeguarding procedures and extent to which families feel safe are outstanding.

Staff have an excellent understanding of the local community and the specific needs of families living in rural areas. Good links have been built with established community-based voluntary organisations who share their expertise and knowledge of the area. Centre staff and commissioned services staff are highly committed to improving outcomes for families, who value the support they receive. As one parent commented 'I do not know what I would have done if the centre was not there.' A good range of support is offered by the centre to local community groups. Staff work well as a team and have built very good links with health and social care colleagues and as a result families most in need receive an integrated package of support.

Safeguarding is a high priority and is integral across all the centre's work. Highly effective safeguarding policies and procedures are in place and understood by all staff. As a result families report feeling safe at the centre. Comprehensive safer recruitment procedures are followed and ongoing training and support in safeguarding are available to staff and volunteers. Excellent communication, particularly with health partners, ensures that families in need of additional support are identified early. The work of the family outreach service is effective in providing individualised packages of support for families, with effective signposting to other services.

The centre provides an inclusive environment and available resources effectively promote the diversity of the wider community. Families are seen as individuals and treated with respect. Some information is available in the different languages spoken in the community and the centre provides access to translation and interpreting

services.

In order to be accessible to families many groups are provided in rural villages and the surrounding community. Publicity and information are provided at these sessions and there is effective signposting to services. A taxi bursary is available for some families to allow them to benefit from specific services, for example structured parenting courses. Resources are well managed and planning of groups on an area/district basis avoids duplication.

Ongoing evaluations and service specification forms are completed for all groups, and specific programmes are reviewed annually. Sometimes these lack detail and are not always sufficiently focused or evaluated to drive improvement. The centre has introduced a system to track children's progress and parents' and carers' training and employment. The centre has produced an accurate self-evaluation and priorities effectively feed into its business plan. A wide range of data is available to the centre which is used effectively to target services and assess and evaluate its work.

The leadership team provides effective management and a visible presence at the centre. Staff demonstrate high levels of commitment to working with families and have a good understanding of the diverse range of issues they face. The centre is committed to involving parents and carers at all levels of the centre. Parents and carers are encouraged to contribute to the centre through discussion and feedback; however, this is not as strong in community groups. Despite concerted efforts by centre staff too few parents and carers contribute formally to shaping services or are actively involved in the governance of the centre. The local advisory group provides challenge and supports the centre. The group understands the issues faced by the centre and this means that the centre has good capacity for improvement.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Develop more rigorous procedures for evaluating services by:
 - setting clear aims and targets for all groups, sessions and programmes
 - effectively evaluating services against aims and targets
 - ensuring evaluations feed into future planning.
- Strengthen parents' and carers' contributions to the work of the centre, including those from community-based groups, in shaping services and decision making.

How good are outcomes for families?

2

Families enthusiastically engage with and enjoy the groups which run at the centre and the many groups which the centre runs and/or supports in the community. One parent told inspectors that by attending groups at the centre they benefited from

'some quality time with my girls' and that 'children can interact with other children'. Many small voluntary groups are supported by the 'Fun Van' commissioned by the centre. Families and volunteers benefit from a wide range of activities and the modelling of good practice and positive interaction demonstrated by staff. They are encouraged to build on this good practice; however, the level of engagement varies. All groups follow the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum, with some activities specifically focused on improving weaker areas of the children's development. As a result the children are doing better at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage. Helpful information is given to parents and carers about practical activities they can do at home to support children's development. Transition arrangements are good and children are well prepared for school. Opportunities for parents and carers to access learning and development are good through courses such as English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). Effective preparation by staff, including sharing expectations and the commitment required of parents and carers, ensures that the drop-out rate is low. A volunteer programme has recently been established at the centre. The introduction of the employment tracker will enable the centre to effectively assess the impact of its work on supporting families' economic stability.

Families who need additional support or those in crisis benefit from engagement with the family outreach service. Outreach work is tailored to the individual needs of the family. Open communication and clear expectations provided by staff ensure that outcomes improve and families are able to sustain the positive improvements. Parents and carers with mental health issues and those who need supporting with parenting issues gain excellent guidance and advice. Children on child protection plans are well supported and there is effective communication between agencies. The use of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) means that families receive a comprehensive package of support.

Healthy lifestyles are promoted through the provision of healthy snacks and displays. These contribute to low obesity levels in children. Children who attend the centre benefit from open access to outdoor play space, and access to the school site during holiday periods provides good opportunities for physical play. Groups such as 'Active Play' promote physical health and exercise. Breastfeeding rates, at six to eight weeks after birth, are good and above the local authority average. Adult cookery courses encourage parents and carers to provide healthy and nutritious meals for their families. There is good evidence of sustained changes to healthy meals from parents and carers who have attended the course.

Parents and carers who attend the centre are encouraged to contribute to its work through service evaluations and discussions. A small number of parents and carers contribute their ideas through 'parent view' meetings. There are fewer opportunities for parents and carers who access groups within the community to contribute their views and opinions and to receive feedback. Information and suggestions from parents and carers are shared with the local advisory group but discussions and outcomes are not widely shared.

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	1
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	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	2

How good is the provision?

2

The family outreach service is highly effective in supporting families. Comprehensive initial assessments, effective communication and information sharing between agencies ensure that work is clearly focused and families receive very good levels of support. Regular meetings with health partners are effective in identifying families who will benefit from additional support. Early interventions are put in place to prevent issues escalating.

Staff make very good use of the space available at the centre. Many families access groups provided directly by the centre in the community or at community-based voluntary groups supported by the centre. The Ladybirds parent and toddler group runs at the centre.

The centre has established strong links with an extensive range of partner agencies from both the statutory and voluntary sectors. There is a wide variety of publicity and information available at the centre and at community-based groups.

Families receive a good level of care, guidance and support. They are encouraged to treat each other with respect. Staff are committed to seeing them as individuals and have a good understanding of some of the issues they may face, including the feeling of isolation which some families may feel living in rural areas.

The centre provides a mix of universal and targeted services. Staff have a good understanding of their target groups and the numbers attending are increasing, for example fathers/male carers. The ongoing process of evaluating services includes analysis of data which show that the centre is reaching all areas of the community. The centre is committed to providing activities which are accessible to all areas of the community, for example the Active Play Group on Saturdays allows working parents and carers to attend with their children.

Parents and carers benefit from a comprehensive learning and development programme. Courses such as cookery are popular and well attended. A range of structured parenting programmes are offered for families most in need, which effectively support parents and carers in understanding their children and improving family relationships. Some parents and carers have been successful in progressing to accredited courses and gaining employment in the local early years workforce. One parent commented 'it is without doubt that without the training and experience of community parenting [course] I would not have been successful [in gaining employment]'. A taxi bursary is available for families, particularly those from rural areas who would find it hard to access groups on public transport.

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 centre provides an inclusive environment which is reflected in displays and resources and the staff's practice. Staff have an excellent understanding of the needs of families living in rural areas and as a result support many groups in local villages which are more easily accessible. The centre analyses data about specific groups to ensure that services are reaching out to all areas of the community and that outcomes are improving. Families from minority ethnic communities and children with disabilities are well represented at the centre. The achievement gap between the most disadvantaged children and the rest is beginning to close. The centre is now focusing its attention on boys' achievement as this has been identified as lower than girls'.

Effective deployment of staff and resources means that the centre provides good value for money. Space at the centre is well utilised including the moveable partitioning in the large playroom to make two separate rooms. The outside play area is well resourced and there is access to some of the school's outside areas during holidays. The provision of commissioned services from a number of local voluntary organisations supports community sustainability.

Safeguarding procedures are excellent. Rigorous and robust safeguarding procedures are consistently applied across all aspects of the centre. Staff benefit from safeguarding training and opportunities to develop their skills. Clear procedures, effective working practices and communication with social care and health colleagues

mean that families most in need of intervention and support receive very good support. The work of the family outreach service is effective in empowering families to develop and build on their skills to better support their families.

Regular evaluations contribute to the centre’s assessment of its effectiveness. Services specification forms, which include specific aims and objectives, are completed for all groups and programmes run by the centre. The effective use of data contributes to the centre’s evaluation of its work. Tracking systems have recently been introduced to more effectively assess the longer-term impact on improving outcomes for families. Procedures are not yet in place to effectively monitor the quality of the evaluations and services specification and as a result sometimes the centre’s group’s aims and objectives lack clarity. Systems to analyse and evaluate feedback and group evaluation forms are not sufficiently developed resulting in missed opportunities to bring about further improvements.

Parents and carers contribute to the work of the centre in a wide range of ways. Feedback from parents and carers is acted upon and, where appropriate, changes made to services. The centre has worked hard to engage parents and carers more formally through groups such as ‘parent view’; however, numbers remain low. The use of the ‘You said, we did’ format allows staff to be able to demonstrate how parents’ and carers’ views are taken forward. The response ‘we did’ includes actions the centre takes as a result of the feedback; however, this information is limited to parents and carers accessing the centre. There are missed opportunities to obtain the views of parents and carers who receive support from the centre via community-based groups.

The area coordinator, senior managers and staff work well together and are committed to raising standards and driving improvements for the families they support. All staff receive a good package of support and training. Line management systems are clear and staff are well supported to undertake their respective roles. Governance arrangements are good and the advisory group has a clear understanding of the specific needs of the centre’s reach area. As a result the centre has good capacity for sustained improvement. The revised business planning arrangements will improve further the advisory group’s ability to set challenging targets and hold the centre to account.

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	3
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	2
The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated,	2

illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties	
The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults	1
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	2
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

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Battle Children's Centre on 29 February and 1 March 2012. We judged the centre as good overall.

The children's centre building provides a very welcoming environment for families, and one in which you feel safe. Many of you benefit from the groups that the centre supports or runs in the community, particularly those of you who live in rural areas and access local services. Many of you will be familiar with the 'Fun Van' and benefit from the times that it visits community-based groups and provides activities for you and your children to enjoy. Children who access services at the centre also receive a good level of support. Activities are well attended and linked to the Early Years Foundation Stage. Inspectors saw how much your children enjoy the sessions and you also told us this. One parent who captured the views of many commented, 'Children learn to access activities which they cannot have at home, including messy play.' The centre is proactive in evaluating all the services it offers to ensure that they continue to meet your needs effectively. We have asked the centre to strengthen their procedures so that services are well targeted and deliver the maximum benefits for you and your families.

All staff involved in the centre, whether employed directly or through commissioned services, are committed to working with you and your families to improve outcomes. They act as good role models and offer you practical support and guidance on a wide range of issues. They have a good knowledge of the local community and services which are available, and can signpost you appropriately. There is an extensive range of publicity and information available at the centre building. Staff ensure that those

of you who only access groups in the community have access to the same information as they display it for you at the groups.

Those of you who may need additional support benefit from work provided by the family outreach service workers. They meet regularly with partner agencies such as health and social care to discuss who may be experiencing difficulties on a range of issues and decide what support they can offer. The family outreach workers work with you and your family to improve areas which you are finding difficult. They are skilled at working with you and are clear about what sort of support they can offer. Many of you benefit from this service and report that it improves your family life and that you are successful in overcoming many issues. Some of you also benefit from attending structured parenting programmes. Staff take time to make sure that you are fully aware of what to expect from the programme. Those of you who successfully complete parenting programmes report that it improves family relationships. Many of you benefit from attending other courses and training events run by the centre. Some of you have been successful in gaining employment as a result.

The centre has worked hard to establish itself in the community and build effective links. They also support existing private, voluntary and independent groups including parent and toddler groups, nurseries and pre-schools. Links with key agencies including health and social care are very good and ensure that you receive excellent levels of support. Staff are involved in supporting community events and are actively involved in providing services which are accessible to you. They are committed to working in partnership with you to bring about improvements to your lives. Those of you who suffer from postnatal depression and mental health issues are well supported by staff who have developed skills and knowledge in these areas.

The centre provides healthy snacks for your children and they have an extensive range of healthy lifestyle information. Children who attend the centre benefit from open access to the outdoor play space. The 'Active Play' sessions encourage you and your children to participate in physical exercise. Those of you who attend cookery courses benefit from healthy recipes and ideas and many of you report that you provide healthier meals as a result. Breastfeeding rates are good and obesity levels are low.

Staff are skilled in supporting you and have a good understanding of the issues you face. A taxi bursary is available for families who may have difficulties accessing services. You are treated with respect and seen as individuals. Centre staff encourage you to contribute to the work of the centre and welcome your feedback on the services they provide. When you make suggestions they consider these and if possible make changes to services. The centre has worked hard to try to involve many of you in the 'parent view' group; however, the numbers who attend remain low. There are missed opportunities for those of you who do not access the centre building to contribute effectively to its work or to receive feedback. We have asked the centre to look at how to involve more of you in its work.

Thank you to everybody who took the time to come and speak with us and to let us know your thoughts and views about the centre. We are very grateful to you all and we wish you and your families all the very best for the future.

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