

Inspection report for Links Children's Centre

Local authority	Hampshire
Inspection number	367832
Inspection dates	9-10 August 2011
Reporting inspector	Susan Mann HMI

Centre governance	The local authority
Centre leader	Ben Calder
Date of previous inspection	This is the centre's first inspection
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Linked school if applicable	Not applicable
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Squirrels Daycare and Pre-school EY357913

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.

Published: August 2011



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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 centre users, managers and frontline staff. They met with the Chair of the Partnership Advisory Board, a number of partners and a representative from the local authority. They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

Links Children's Centre was designated in 2006 and provides the full core offer. It is situated on the ground floor of a building which it shares with Children's Services. Staff are employed by the local authority and work in both Links Children's Centre and the nearby Branches Children's Centre. The centre uses several other locations to deliver services. The local authority governs the centre, and a joint partnership board oversees the work of both centres. The centre has a memorandum of understanding with Squirrels Daycare to provide the centre's early years full daycare provision.

Almost all families living in the centre's catchment area are from a White British background, with very few families from minority ethnic heritages. There are a large number of families living in areas of deprivation within the centre's reach area. The number of children under the age of five living in workless households is above the national average in the centre's area. In 2010, data indicate children enter the Early Years Foundation Stage with a much narrower range of skills and abilities than those typically expected for their age. By the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage, about 37% of children gain 78 points or more across the six areas of learning which is below the national average.

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 users and the wider community

1

Capacity for sustained improvement

The centre's capacity for sustained improvement, including the quality of its leadership and management

1

Main findings

Links is an outstanding children's centre. It offers a caring and inclusive environment where families feel exceptionally welcome and comfortable. It provides an excellent range of services which meet the needs of those living in the catchment area very well. Parents express a very high level of satisfaction and great enjoyment in their engagement with the centre, making such comments as, 'I can't praise the staff enough,' and, 'People actually care around here.'

All outcomes and aspects of the centre are outstanding. Superb partnership working with external organisations, such as health, social care and 'Homestart', enhances and widens the range of services substantially and this meets individual needs very well. Partnership working with parents is excellent. They are actively involved in the centre through participating in the 'Family Forum' and becoming a volunteer or 'Information Champion'. These roles enable adults to learn and consolidate a wide variety of skills which broadens the centre's overall capacity to deliver services. This, together with excellent leadership and management, means the centre's overall effectiveness is outstanding.

A particular strength of the centre is the extremely high focus given to ongoing improvement. The drive for further development prevails throughout the centre staff team, and is most notable in the senior management team. Exemplary evaluation processes provide a very strong foundation for further development, because future priorities are identified accurately. This leads to outstanding outcomes for families who access the centre. As a result, the centre's capacity to improve is outstanding. The centre's provision for adult learning opportunities meets the needs of users very well. Many demonstrate greatly improved understanding of the value of eating healthily through attendance at the 'Cook and Eat' course. A very high priority is placed on groups and courses which develop parenting skills, self-esteem and confidence. These have been correctly assessed as a priority for those living in the centre's reach area. The centre realises the need to offer opportunities for adults to develop their literacy and numeracy skills, and has already started working in partnership with local colleges with a view to offering such courses within the year.

This is planned to help adults become more prepared for the workforce and more confident in day-to-day life.

The centre promotes equality and diversity extremely well. Staff are superb role models because they demonstrate a very high level of respect to all who use the centre's services. The centre has taken vigorous and constructive action to help adults understand how others may feel disadvantaged or excluded by closed friendship groups. This has been very successful and centre users greatly value one another's needs and opinions. They demonstrate a very high level of trust and respect for one another. The needs of those groups most in need are championed by the centre. In particular, teenage parents, lone parents, and those families living in workless households receive excellent care and provision, planned alongside them and delivered in a way most suited to their needs. Consequently, this results in a very high level of user engagement and exceptionally successful outcomes.

The centre's practice to safeguard children and vulnerable adults is exemplary. Staff and volunteers consistently give the highest priority to safeguarding children. Relevant training on child protection is enhanced by regular centre meetings and discussion to keep all knowledge and practice up-to-date.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Provide further opportunities for adults to engage in more learning which will help them improve their literacy and numeracy skills, to promote even better outcomes for themselves and their families.

How good are outcomes for users?

1

The general well-being and health of families who use the centre are greatly improved as a result of their engagement with centre services. Excellent links with frontline health services ensure universal and targeted provision is highly successful. For example, pregnant teenager parents access a young person's midwifery clinic and service at the centre. They prefer the environment of the centre to general clinical provision, and they readily access the 'Young Parents Group' which runs alongside the clinic. This gives them emotional and practical support with parenting and their own well-being, leading to better child/parent attachment and more successful family life. Rates of child obesity are higher in the centre's reach area than is the case locally or nationally, but are steadily reducing. This reduction is as a result of concerted emphasis on healthy eating through groups, such as 'Meet and Munch', provision of free fruit within the centre, and a consistent focus on health promotion within all sessions.

Children demonstrate an extremely good understanding of how to assess risk and keep themselves safe whilst they play. For example, in the 'Peep Outside' session, children excitedly gather around the pond to look at creatures living in the water.

They demonstrate a very good understanding of the need to stay away from the edge to stay safe, whilst enjoying the outdoor learning environment. Outcomes for those children with child protection plans are excellent. Centre staff work exceptionally well with relevant external agencies to prioritise the needs of the child and consider all the challenges presented in the home. This 'whole family' approach is central to the centre's ethos. This ensures that all relevant issues are addressed, which sustains better long-term outcomes for families. Common Assessment Framework (CAF) processes are extremely robust. The centre provides a high level of support to other local agencies who take on the role of 'lead professional' in the CAF process. They support early years providers and parent and toddler groups through drop ins and workshops, and through individual support, to ensure children's welfare is protected effectively.

In the centre's catchment area, there is exceptionally effective partnership working between the centre support teacher, early years providers and schools. Children are inquisitive in their participation of activities because the quality is very good. They are active learners and demonstrate very good levels of independence. Targeted development work and support have been highly effective and have resulted in significant improvement in children's levels of achievement in recent years. Children living in the centre's reach area now make outstanding progress from their starting points during the Early Years Foundation Stage. The enhanced focus on speech and language development in recent years has been very successful. Parents report noticeable and rapid improvement in their children's speech. Early Years Foundation Stage profile data indicate greatly improved levels of skills and knowledge in aspects of communication, language and literacy. All users express the view groups are extremely enjoyable and beneficial. Individual case studies clearly demonstrate the positive impact of sessions to help parents develop the understanding of child development, including the 'Parent Plus Group' and the 'Triple P'. One parent summed up the views of many by saying attendance at these groups, 'Helped me to build bridges with my children.'

Centre users are extremely involved in the decision making and delivery of services at the centre. Many are involved in the very active 'Family Forum', where ideas for provision and improvements are discussed. This group is highly proactive at initiating projects, such as the gardening club and weekly garden drop-in sessions to tend to the centre's recently developed flower and vegetable patch. Those adults who are less confident develop positive relationships very well because of sensitive one-to-one support and excellent individual development planning. Users from all parts of the reach area confidently communicate their views and become involved in centre life. This fosters an atmosphere of community spirit and sense of belonging which nurtures emotional well-being exceptionally well.

The centre demonstrates a high level of success in helping parents develop economic stability. Courses and education opportunities have excellent rates of attendance. The centre has developed excellent partnership working with Jobcentre Plus. Weekly sessions at the centre provide advice about benefits, training and employment opportunities, and many adults make frequent use of this service. A high number of

centre users undertake early years childcare qualifications. Several adults have been referred to local colleges to undertake courses, and the centre is developing this liaison further to benefit more adults. The extremely popular volunteer programme often acts as the first step for parents to develop their skills and confidence, enabling them to move on into paid employment or further training.

These are the grades for the outcomes for users

The extent to which children, including those from vulnerable groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles	1
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 users enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	1
The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships and users contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	1
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents are developing economic stability and independence including access to training and employment.	1

How good is the provision?

1

The quality of provision is outstanding. The centre knows its reach area extremely well through excellent partnership working, thorough outreach initiatives, high-quality data analysis, and strong community links. In particular, staff make extremely robust assessment of the needs of the most vulnerable families to provide a package of support highly pertinent to the individual needs. The 'Family Support Outreach Team' works flexibly to accommodate these needs. Six-week programmes of support for families enable great strides to be made through manageable small steps. This builds adults' confidence as well as improving their outcomes. As a result, a very high proportion of families who receive individual support go on to engage in a number of groups at the centre, improving their outcomes further. The outreach team and centre management team already reach a high proportion of families. In particular, they engage those families most in need who live in the reach area. The team is dedicated to broadening user engagement further, and promotion of centre services is a priority for staff and volunteers, through events such as 'Gazebo Days', and the work of 'Information Champions' who keep local notice boards updated and act as ambassadors for the centre at their local school or pre-school.

The exceptional quality of learning and development opportunities at the centre is because all sessions are planned to incorporate user needs and interests. In addition, all are planned alongside the support teacher to ensure learning is linked to the Early Years Foundation Stage principles. All groups are delivered by a qualified early years practitioner, supported by a trained volunteer, which assure high-quality provision.

The quality of care, guidance and support offered to centre users is exemplary. Families who find themselves in difficult circumstances are given exceptional practical, emotional and immediate support to enable them to cope and move forward. Staff work very well with other organisations, such as schools, health and social care services, to give coordinated support to families in times of need. A very strong emphasis is placed on personal development and parenting skills to enable improvement. As a result, parents say their family life improves, and they enjoy their role of parent more.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users	1
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all users	1
The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of users and the wider community	1
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to users within the centre and the wider community	1

How effective are the leadership and management?

1

Leadership and management are outstanding and wholly focused on improving outcomes for those most in need. Governance arrangements are extremely well established. The centre's cluster Partnership Board is effective in its role. It evaluates its own impact and strives to improve further. It is led by an experienced chair and has a good level of parent representation to ensure the needs of the reach area are represented. The local authority provides an excellent level of support and rigorous challenge. Very robust processes of monitoring and assessment are in place and these ensure ongoing evaluation and development. Partnership working with other agencies and community organisations is very good, and these make a significant contribution to the services users enjoy at the centre.

The centre manager provides high-quality leadership. He has a visible presence at the centre through delivering some groups which means parents know him and feel able to approach him. He has a clear view of the strengths of the centre and has very high expectations of what the centre can achieve. The other members of the senior management team, the centre coordinator and centre support teacher, work very well with the centre manager to set and achieve ambitious targets. These stem from robust evaluations of services and the needs of the reach area to ensure services are best matched to need. Services are reviewed with regards to the most effective way of delivering services in order to maximise resources available. For example, staff have received training from the speech and language therapist to enable them to deliver and advise parents during groups, which has proved very

successful. Very good use of data analysis provides an accurate view of where best to target services and outreach work. Excellent collaboration with community services to use accommodation and support existing groups ensures local services are not duplicated. As a consequence, best use is made of resources and the centre offers outstanding value for money.

Safeguarding practices are exemplary and are given the highest priority by all at the centre. Staff are tenacious in their approach to ensuring families receive the relevant help and communication between key agencies and the centre is excellent. The suitability of all adults who work or volunteer at the centre is rigorously checked. Staff and users demonstrate an excellent understanding of the need to protect children’s welfare.

The centre puts high emphasis on promoting equality and diversity within the centre. Families who need support to speak and understand English are given very good support. Translation services are provided whenever needed. There is very little cultural diversity within the reach area, but the centre reflects worldwide cultures very well through its resources and displays to increase user awareness of the wider world. Equality of outcomes for children is improving significantly. The gap in levels of skills and abilities of children at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage between the lowest 20% and the rest has been reducing in recent years, and is now much better than the local authority average.

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	1
The extent to which ambitious targets drive improvement, provision is integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community	1
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of users and the wider community	1
The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties	1
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 evaluation is used to shape and improve services and activities	1
The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services the centre has been commissioned to provide	1
The extent to which the centre supports and encourages the wider community to engage with services and uses their views to develop the	1

range of provision	
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Any other information used to inform the judgements made during this inspection

None.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Links Children's Centre on 9 and 10 August 2011. We judged the centre as outstanding in every aspect.

We would like to thank those of you who took time to talk to us about your experiences at Links. It was very helpful to hear what the centre does, and what it means to you and your families. It is very clear that you enjoy the groups, such as 'Peep Outside', 'Cook and Eat', and 'Young Parents' very much indeed. You also told us that you feel very well supported by staff at the centre.

Links is doing an excellent job in providing high-quality services for your community. We have graded it with the highest grade possible because of this. There are far too many strengths about the centre to write about them all here, because everything is so good, so we will just outline some of the best elements.

One of the centre's particular strengths is the way so many of you are involved in centre life. This might be through sitting on the Partnership Board, being members of the 'Family Forum', acting as volunteers, or being 'Information Champions' for the centre. All of these roles are very important because they give you more influence over what happens at the centre, and it gives you opportunities to learn new skills to be involved with centre work.

Another strength is the centre's manager and staff team. Everyone who works at the centre is dedicated to improving the lives of adults and children who use the centre and they do an excellent job. They make sure that the services on offer are very well matched to what the community needs. Outreach work by the family support team is excellent. There is a wide range of different groups that are of very good quality to help you learn about healthy cooking and how children develop. We have asked the centre to provide more opportunities for adults to learn about adult literacy and numeracy skills for those who wish, which will help when you are ready to look for jobs.

Children have enjoyable activities to do which help them learn. They do very well because centre staff are highly skilled in providing the best types of activity. Staff work very well with other partners and early years settings and keep improving the quality of care and education that is on offer. As a result, children in the local area are now doing much better with their speech and language development, and do very well at school by the time they reach the end of the Reception year.

Finally, we were very impressed with the centre's dedication to keeping children and families safe. Staff have excellent relationships with other agencies, such as health and social care, to get extra help and support when needed. Programmes, such as the 'Home Safety Scheme' have helped many of you make your homes safer. Staff and volunteers demonstrate a very clear commitment to keep children safe and protected from harm.

We know many of you are very proud of your centre, and greatly appreciate the work done by everyone at Links. It is an excellent children's centre.

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