

Inspection report for Brackley Sure Start children's centre

Local authority	Northamptonshire
Inspection number	361073
Inspection dates	30 June–1 July 2010
Reporting inspector	Linda Killman HMI

Centre governance	Brackley Library Children's Centre Voluntary Management Committee
Centre leader	Interim Linda Holvey
Date of previous inspection	First inspection
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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 two of Her Majesty's Inspectors. Inspectors held meetings with centre staff, representatives from professional partnerships and the local authority, parents and carers. They observed the centre's work, looked at some individual case studies and spoke informally with parents and family members attending activities. Documents were scrutinised such as the centre's evaluation of its performance and its subsequent plans for improvement, safeguarding policies and procedures.

Inspection judgements

Grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Information about the centre

The centre, situated in the well-used library in the middle of Brackley, a small market town, opened in March 2007 as a Phase 2 Sure Start children's centre. Brackley is generally an area of social and economic advantage; a commuter area with few workless households or families on benefits. However, Brackley South which the centre is located within is ranked one of the 70% most deprived areas in the country. There is low ethnic diversity in this area; most families are White British.

Since April 2009 the centre has been providing the full core offer of Phase 2 services. Accommodation is limited to an office, an average-sized multi-purpose room, a small family room and an outdoor play area, so the centre hires local venues for outreach work across the town. An advisory board governs the centre with representation from centre staff, early years providers, the local primary school, partners involved in delivering services and users. Temporary arrangements for leadership and management are in place in the absence of a permanent children's centre lead. The

Principal Librarian, Children and Families is leading on a part-time basis and the centre coordinator has stepped up to take responsibility for day to day management on a temporary basis.

Overall effectiveness

The effectiveness of the children’s centre in meeting the needs of and improving outcomes for users and the wider community

3
3

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

Main findings

The children’s centre is a welcoming, harmonious place where all parents, children and other family members feel very safe, valued and included. Protecting the child is embedded in the centre’s practice; robust safeguarding arrangements ensure the safety and well-being of children and all service users. The centre has identified astutely that a predominant issue affecting many parents and carers in the area is a feeling of isolation. Having spent their pre-parent lives working, many have had little opportunity to get to know their neighbours and do not have an extended family at hand to support them. Many confirmed that the centre has become their ‘lifeline’ and they speak highly of the helpfulness and professionalism of all staff. This key strength was confirmed by the inspection.

Very productive links established with health services have had a positive impact on improving the health and well-being of children and their parents and carers; many initial referrals are made by midwives and health visitors. Ante- and post-natal provision is of good quality with the centre providing a good range of activities to help new parents understand how to promote their babies’ development and learning. Planning for children’s activities is satisfactory but the centre’s good knowledge and assessment of individual needs are not used well enough to plan adaptations and build in progression. Some users, inspired by the centre’s work, are beginning to come forward as volunteers, for example in supporting new mothers with breast feeding. Take up is extremely high for the dads’ group, which runs on Saturdays to accommodate working fathers. Membership has trebled in 18 months with 81 fathers participating.

The centre actively encourages users to provide it with feedback and is successful in doing so. This is because relationships are trusting and they feel safe to express their views. These are listened to, considered thoughtfully and if appropriate, current activities are adapted or extended and new ones introduced. Nonetheless, the centre is not successfully reaching all groups of potential users, particularly those whose circumstances make them more vulnerable. A very few parents attend the special

friends group for children who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Similarly few lone parents use the services. The centre has not yet been successful in reaching young adults and teenage parents because it has not explored all possible avenues of contact for example, through technologies or developing an effective link with the local secondary school.

The centre functions efficiently on a daily basis because leaders and managers at an operational level are well-organised, motivated and intent on improvement. Staff are happy and provided with appropriate training to develop their skills. As a result they are willing and keen to develop the centre's work. Leadership from the temporary lead is inspiring with clear ambition to drive improvement and deliver quality services. Self-evaluation is reasonably accurate but not yet focused acutely enough on the impact of provision on children's, parents' and families' lives over time and used to inform future planning. The centre is not tracking children well enough as they progress to pre-school, nursery and beyond so that it knows whether its work has been beneficial.

The advisory board is at an early stage of development. The centre has identified weaknesses in the board's understanding of its role and responsibilities and has responded swiftly by providing in-house training to address this. Currently too much responsibility for monitoring and strategic planning rests with the centre lead and coordinator. Thus the board is supportive but not in a position to challenge the centre and hold it to account. Much same applies to the local authority which acts as the centre's accountable body in all legal and financial matters. In the last financial year it took a firm stand to ensure that finances were spent appropriately and set challenging targets for improvement. However, personnel with responsibility for monitoring the centre's progress in reaching its targets and quality assuring the centre's performance are too thinly spread to be effective. For example, the centre's work is not observed directly for quality assurance purposes and to provide it with constructive and helpful feedback. In addition, the local authority is not providing a strong enough steer on its vision for the centre's development or by procuring products and services on the centre's behalf to achieve best value for money. The centre's recent progress and the energy with which weaknesses are currently being tackled are indicative of its satisfactory capacity to sustain improvements.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Extend the range of services provided to reach targeted groups of users especially those whose circumstances make them vulnerable.
- Strengthen the advisory board's and local authority's capacity to quality assure the centre's work and provide a balance of support and challenge.
- Improve self-evaluation by:
 - focusing more rigorously on the impact of the centre's work in improving outcomes for children, adults and families over time

- ensuring that responsibility for monitoring and evaluating the centre’s work is dispersed more evenly among managers, leaders, the advisory board and the local authority
 - ensuring that outcomes of evaluation are linked to plans for improvement.
- Improve the use of assessment to adapt activities to individual needs.

How good are outcomes for users?

3

Outcomes for children, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities, and their families are improving. Adults are developing a greater understanding of how to promote children’s development through quality, purposeful play and activities. The centre has not yet developed a secure system for tracking and measuring children’s progress once they move on but where evidence exists it shows that while the majority of outcomes are satisfactory, they are good in health and safety. Children visibly enjoy the activities they participate in and adults report how much they enjoy visiting the centre because it enables them to socialise with other adults and make new friends.

A good range of strategies are in place to improve children’s health, physical and emotional development. A wide range of activities, such as baby yoga, B.A.B.S. (Brackley Breast Feeding Support Group); New Baby and You; parenting craft; buggy walks and baby massage all promote healthy living and equip parents with knowledge and understanding of how best to care for themselves and their children. Mothers participating in the baby massage class, for example, told inspectors that their babies were calmer, feeding better and sleeping well at night. Outside play enables children to be active and benefit from fresh air and exercise. Similarly the centre’s good systems and procedures for health and safety helps users to develop their skills in reducing risk by, for example, safety week activities and basic first aid training. Parents are confident to share any concerns they may have with centre staff; child protection arrangements are widely publicised and clearly understood.

Children attending activities at the centre make good progress in their social skills and in language and literacy but less so in numeracy. They show awareness of others and begin to play alongside one another and learn to share and take turns. The centre identified and evidenced several cases where children have flourished socially and adults have regained their confidence by attending sessions. Several parents described the centre as a ‘godsend’ commenting very positively about how they were now able to recognise the value of quality interaction with their children and the importance of purposeful play. Young children benefit from immersion in high quality books and resources that the library provides. ‘Rhyme Time’ is hugely enjoyed by children and their parents where together they engage in song, dance and music making.

Secure procedures are in place to help children and adults form positive relationships

and make a positive contribution towards the work of the centre. The centre demonstrated some striking examples where adults are developing their skills to support others for example, in offering support to breast feeding mothers or as members of the newly formed parent advisory group that is contributing to decision-making within the centre. The take-up for adult education sessions has been disappointing. A lack of crèche facilities inhibits easy access. There are cases where parents have moved on to training and employment following the centre's support and guidance but little evidence that many parents are improving their economic well-being in this way. Jobcentre Plus holds regular sessions at the centre but take-up is low.

These are the grades for outcomes

The extent to which children, including those from vulnerable 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	2
The extent to which all users enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	3
The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships and users contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	3
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents are developing economic stability and independence including access to training	3

How good is the provision?

3

Assessment arrangements are still in the early stages, yet staff are aware of this and

clearly understand how to develop these further. Centre staff know the children and their families well even if they do not always record the information systematically. They are aware of importance of sharing the information they hold on children with other early years settings children may attend and links are developing with other providers to facilitate this. Strong provision is in place for the common assessment framework and networking with other agencies to ensure the safety and welfare of children. The inclusive ethos generated by the centre and its promotion of diversity through for example, resources that reflect different cultures, ensures that users from minority ethnic backgrounds feel at ease and have equal access to provision.

A wide range of purposeful play is available covering all areas of learning and offering a safe, positive learning environment for children which they are free to explore and have fun. Activity planning is still being developed to ensure appropriate coverage and variety. Evaluation of the effectiveness of activities is insufficiently rigorous and assessment information is not always being used effectively to adapt activities according to individual need. Children benefit from and are stimulated by the good quality of resources. All activities have a strong focus on building confidence, self-esteem and parenting skills.

The range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of those using the centre well but the centre has not yet extended its reach sufficiently. Health professionals confirm that the few teenage parents in the locality have not yet benefited from the support that the centre can offer. There are no activities that specifically target other groups of young people, such as babysitting classes. Take-up by lone parents and families with children who have special educational needs and/or disabilities is low.

The quality of care for those users that frequent the centre is good. This is because communication is effective, staff are approachable and parents feel confident that they can seek guidance and help with their individual concerns from any member of staff. This has helped some families in crisis particularly those that feel isolated and where their mental well-being is at risk. The quality of written information is good because the centre is diligent in keeping information up to date and careful thought is given to its quality and accessibility. Advice on alcohol, drug abuse and sexual health matters is limited. Not all areas of technology have been fully exploited. The website is not particularly engaging or user-friendly: opportunities for interaction with the centre, for example, by using blogs are limited. The centre uses a range of venues so that activities take place in suitable accommodation and are accessible to all. The centre has no remit to provide child care but the lack of crèche facilities constrains access to activities where adults require one-to-one support.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents	3
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and other users	
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all users	3
The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of users and the wider community	3
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to users within the centre and the wider community	3

How effective are the leadership and management?

3

The centre is emerging from a particularly challenging time in its history. The current senior leadership team is clearly focused on promoting good quality services that reflect the needs of users. The centre is moving forward once again with renewed confidence and energy.

Day to day management arrangements are good. The centre coordinator has stepped up to the mark impressively in taking responsibility for the centre during a difficult period. She promotes good team work, has won the complete confidence of staff, as well as the hearts and minds of users. She has had a significant impact in introducing systems to develop secure self-evaluation processes many of which are in their infancy. The temporary lead provides good support and direction. She has a clear vision for the centre's future and demonstrates strong ambition to develop its work. This senior leadership partnership is effective but too many responsibilities and tasks rest on their shoulders. Responsibility and accountability is not dispersed equitably across the leadership team, the advisory board and the local authority to ensure sustainability and greater objectivity in assessing the centre's effectiveness.

Performance management arrangements for front line staff are secure with regular reviews and opportunities for professional discussion. Currently they rely mainly on regular feedback from users to evaluate their performance although formal peer observations are planned to start very soon. The centre is responsive to the training needs of individuals to develop their skills and promote good practice. Performance management processes for senior staff are less effective because their work is not observed at first hand. There are, however, sharp success criteria and milestones in this year's development plan against which they can be held accountable.

Users' and staff's safety and security are a priority and the centre adopts recommended good practice across all areas of its work. The centre actively promotes equality and celebrates diversity, for example, in ensuring that activities are relevant and accessible for all parents, including those who work. It is fully aware that its reach is not yet wide enough; this is already a priority in the centre's development plan. Users speak highly of the centre and appreciate all that it provides for them. Partnerships are developing well especially with library staff and health professionals because of the centre's flexibility and willingness to work alongside them. Financial arrangements are satisfactory. The large underspend accrued over the relatively recent past has now been effectively delegated and used

to improve provision, for example to commission services that the centre is unable to provide. The centre provides satisfactory value for money.

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	3
The extent to which ambitious targets drive improvement, provision is integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community	3
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of users and the wider community	3
The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties	3
The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults	2
The extent to which evaluation is used to shape and improve services and activities	3
The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services the centre has been commissioned to provide	3
The extent to which the centre supports and encourages the wider community 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 Brackley Sure Start children's centre on 30 June and 1 July 2010. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

Like you, we were greeted with a warm welcome when we arrived at the centre and found staff very communicative and helpful. Many of you confirmed that you enjoy good relationships with centre staff and this helps you to feel completely safe to seek advice and guidance or to share your concerns. We gathered evidence to confirm that you are very satisfied with the service you receive. Some of you commented that the centre has become your 'lifeline' and comments such as 'I don't know what I

would do without it' were very forthcoming. We found that the centre listens to your views and takes action to accommodate them wherever possible.

We found that the centre is very safety conscious and is good at promoting healthy lifestyles. The activities we visited were of good quality too. Even so, we felt that the centre could use its good knowledge of your children to adapt the activities and tailor them better to suit every child's needs. You remarked that taking part in them has helped you to learn about the importance of play and find new ways of communicating with your children. The children themselves hugely enjoyed their sessions and we were impressed by your willingness to join in.

Although the sessions that we saw during the inspection were good, we found that the range of users that frequent the centre is too narrow. There are groups out there in the community that could benefit hugely from the support and advice that the centre can provide. So we have asked the centre to find more ways of making contact with them, in particular we would like them to reach young people, teenage and lone parents.

The centre runs smoothly on a daily basis and senior leaders are doing a stalwart job in keeping the centre moving forward in the absence of a centre lead. This is a difficult period while temporary arrangements are in place but we are confident in the centre's capacity to retain the quality of the services it offers until a centre lead is once again securely in place. We judged that the advisory board which governs the centre and the local authority which is ultimately responsible for the quality of provision, should be doing much more to support staff and also to hold them to account. We judged that too much responsibility for monitoring the centre's work currently rests on the shoulders of the senior leadership team and we have asked that they address this. We have asked the centre to keep track of your children's progress as they grow up so that it can evaluate how much of a difference it has made to their and your lives.

It was a pleasure to meet many of you during the inspection. Those of you that we talked to are strong advocates of the centre. We hope that you, your children and many more parents and carers who live in Brackley will continue to enjoy and benefit from all of the services available to you in the future. Thank you for contributing to our evidence base by sharing your comments and thoughts so openly.

Yours sincerely

Linda Killman

Her Majesty's Inspector

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