

Inspection report for Millom Children's and Youth Centre

Local authority	Cumbria
Inspection number	365813
Inspection dates	1 – 2 February 2011
Reporting inspector	Allyson Ingall

Centre governance	Local Authority
Centre leader	Susan Lesley Hazeldine
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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Linked school if applicable	Millom Infants School Park View Nursery School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Millom Stepping Stones

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.

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 inspectors and monitored for quality assurance by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors.

The inspectors held meetings with the senior leadership team and staff, members of the Advisory Board, representatives from a wide range of partners, local authority members and users of the centre.

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

Information about the centre

Millom Children's Centre is an open access centre that adjoins Millom Infant School and has been operating as a phase 1 children's centre since opening. It has since been re-designated from 30% to 70% and with limited resources continues to provide more than the full core offer for this provision-deprived community. Park View Nursery and Steppingstones playgroups and Day Care centre are on the same site and the children's centre delivers a number of its services at a range of sites within the community. Most children enter Early Years Foundation Stage provision with skills below those expected for their age and, in particular, for levels of communication language and literacy and personal and social development.

Millom is a rural, post-industrial town, geographically isolated on the South West Cumbrian coast with rural poverty being the main barrier for the community in terms of access to health services, transport and work opportunities. The reach area is predominantly White British with a small Turkish and Chinese community. There are some families in the reach area who moved to the area for 'a better life in the country for their children' and a number of single parent families who moved to escape domestic violence. Incidents of domestic violence, often linked to alcohol abuse, are high in the locality but remain largely unreported in this very close-knit community.

Millom is rated as the 11th most deprived out of 28 local authority areas, with most aspects being ranked around the middle for Cumbria (employment 15th, income 12th, health 15th, education 11th, barriers to housing 13th, crime 22nd) but living environment ranking the lowest (4/28). Proportions of those on benefits are higher than the Cumbrian average with incapacity benefit for the wider Copeland region significantly above the national average. Of the 539 under fives, most live in workless households and rural disadvantage, in terms of transport and employment, is increasing this. A small number are from ethnic minorities and the centre engages with a small minority of them. The centre has 11 registered families with children with disabilities, out of a range of 16-29. A minority of dads are registered, both working and jobless.

The centre is governed by the local authority and has a developing Advisory Board.

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

2

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

2

Main findings

‘A friendly, safe environment where no-one judges you....how did we manage before?’ sum up the views of the users of the centre which has established itself as a key part of Millom’s community. With excellent knowledge of the way the community operates, Millom Children’s Centre has developed localised solutions which meet the needs of their users and wider community exceptionally well.

The deliberate and inclusive strategy of focusing on the wider nought to19 platform pays dividends, both in terms of immediate support for the most vulnerable and as a very effective preventative strategy which sees exceptional provision for teenagers and those with disabilities.

Partners consistently report that the centre staff team are helpful, highly committed and passionate and always looking to do more for the community, through constant and innovative ways of capturing users views and needs, whilst responding instantly and appropriately to crises in users’ lives. This is encapsulated by one member of staff opening up on Christmas Day to meet the needs of a vulnerable youth who had made contact. The fact that many staff live within the community enhances both the

trust that users have in them as well as providing significant local intelligence. It is to the credit of the staff that, with three managers in the past year, the team continued to work successfully without any significant reduction in services.

Staff have a good understanding of safety, safeguarding and child protection systems and practices. Thus, all users show and say that they feel safe at the centre, providing them with a place which is confidential and where they feel secure in raising any issues. The success of the strategy of establishing itself within the community through a wider platform of universal services has focused the centres' efforts on provision and it is only in recent times that it has begun to shift its evaluation systems to analysis of impact on outcomes. Some effective systems are now in place but are yet to be operated consistently or with consideration of impact on the wider key performance indicators. The centre manager, who has been in post for six months, has already made some progress in strategic planning and evaluation systems and, with highly capable staff and planned training, is well placed to effect further improvements.

The strategic shift towards more focused outreach work has been especially successful in addressing provision for the under fives whilst enabling the centre to focus on the key priority of engaging parents in their children's learning. The existence of daily parent and toddler groups elsewhere in the community has led to greater partnership working with outreach staff. They are now able to work alongside families modelling good parenting practices and picking up potential areas of concern. Effective signposting of services and, integrated provision, has ensured the needs of the most vulnerable are met. A particularly innovative project is the partnership with Haverigg prison which enables fathers to bond with their children and is an example of meeting wider community needs.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- To improve the ability of the centre to evaluate its work by:
 - increasing the use of quantitative data, both that which is provided by the local authority and the national indicators, and by devising baseline assessments from which to evaluate specific provision
 - focusing qualitative data around key questions, based on planned outcomes
 - making more consistent use of the service planning and evaluation systems already in place.

How good are outcomes for users?

2

Users across the nought to 19 age range make good use of the centre's extensive services and enjoy and achieve in all outcomes. The three key areas of the centre's work, under fives, children with disabilities (and their families) and youth, ensure that all outcomes are planned for. Good partnerships with a range of organisations ensure limited resources are maximised. The centre is strong on early intervention and prevention. This sometimes means impact on national indicators and key

performance indicators is not immediately evident but the centre is clearly having sustainable, long-term impact on outcomes for future generations. For example, the work with Year 8 at the local secondary school and the centre's Life Choices programme has had a significant impact on attitudes, behaviour and aspirations of young people. This is clearly demonstrated with typical feedback from users such as 'I've decided not to have a baby so early' and from parents who wish all children could have access to the courses. Early indications show a decline in teenage pregnancies but the longer-term impact of improved parenting and economic independence before starting a family is not yet evident.

In addition, the youth strategy provides a range of activities which has widened their horizons and raised their aspirations. As many teenagers themselves told us, 'If I wasn't here (the centre), I'd probably be drinking/smashing windows/having (unprotected) sex'. In particular, the community perception is that the well-attended Friday Football sessions have reduced anti-social behaviour, preventing youngsters from turning to alcohol, drugs and mindless vandalism. The link between alcohol abuse and domestic violence is the first part of the strategy to address the 'hidden' issue within the community.

Behaviour observed in all sessions, even with youngsters with identified behavioural difficulties, is good and both children and adults are developing positive relationships. Youngsters, especially the most vulnerable, are developing their independence and economic well-being with projects, such as Aiming High, which encourage them to plan, carry out and evaluate complex activities to give them skills for the future. For example, in preparing for visits to Blackpool Pleasure Beach and Blackburn Football Club, youngsters take responsibility for risk assessments, costs, marketing and organisation as well as completing the service planning and evaluation forms

Users show increasing awareness of how to keep safe and healthy, and obesity rates are falling as users demonstrate increased knowledge of physical health. Breastfeeding rates have increased as a result of peer mentors, the breastfeeding helpline and the breastfeeding cafe, as well as effective links with Furness General Hospital to flag up any Millom mothers who may need support. Safety booklets, the Super Sid video and incorporating safety messages into universal provision, such as Tots to Teens, family learning sessions and the 1st year Club ensures that most users are able to keep themselves and their families safe. The wide range of information sharing mechanisms, including effective use of the Common Assessment Framework and child protection plans, has led to focused one-to-one support and ensured the safety of all children, with no serious cases being reported within the area in recent years.

Early intervention for speech and language has led to a significant narrowing of the gap for language for communication and thinking and especially for boys. The overall communication language and literacy scores remain below the national average but the nursery, daycare centre and attached school all report increases in children's speech and language abilities as a result of the work of the children's centre. More significantly, the headteacher of the infant school credits sustained parental

engagement (judged exceptional in their recent Ofsted inspection) to the preparatory work of the centre in engaging parents at as early a stage as possible. Feedback from Stay and Play, Chatter Matters and Parentcraft classes has impacted both on children’s skills as well as parental confidence. All parents who attended Chatter Matters stated that they now know more and are more confident in the development of their children’s language and communication skills. Good partnership arrangements with the Millom Network centre provide a range of support to help adults into work but there is currently no available data to evaluate its effectiveness.

Millom Children’s Centre makes a positive contribution to the community, as reflected in year-on-year increases in registrations as well as frequent comments as to how much they value the services which would otherwise not be provided in Millom. The range of mechanisms, both formal and informal, to involve users and the wider community in decision making at the centre ensures that all, including those with disabilities or limited confidence and/or skills, are able to contribute. Users and the wider community feel confident that their suggestions are acted upon, for example, in changing the enrolment procedures to be fairer to all.

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	2
The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships and users contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	2
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents are developing economic stability and independence including access to training	2

How good is the provision?

2

The centre meets over and above its core offer through effective partnerships, innovative use of resources and a highly-able staff team who are willing to ‘go the extra mile’ to meet the needs of their community. The range of services for all sectors of the reach area is outstanding, particularly given the limited resources at its disposal. It promotes good learning and development for children and adults. Many of these achievements are clearly displayed and celebrated throughout the centre. The ability of the centre to ‘draw in the vulnerable through quality universal services’, has been enhanced through the strategic and recent development of outreach services. It is, however, too early to demonstrate the significant impact on outcomes. The balance between universal and targeted services is highly appropriate with a third level of provision, best described as targeted-universal, being particularly suited

to the nature and needs of the community. The centre's strategy in changing the service to fit the need has led to huge increases in engagement and participation. The centre is well-placed to coax the community towards services that are required.

The centre plays a pivotal role in the clear and comprehensive systems for information-sharing, including multi-agency meetings and the use of the Common Assessment Framework. Occasionally, where the relationship between the family and the local school has broken down, the centre provides a place for team around the child meetings which ensures the children are kept within the system.

The range of partners is wide, innovative and appropriate to the area with many other local services unable to be sustained in this isolated community without the support of the centre. Many partners summed up the value which they place on their links with the centre, crediting their survival on the role the centre plays in helping to sustain services at a local level. The provision of services such as Parentcraft classes at the centre is one of a number of examples where users report that they would not have travelled to locations where such classes usually run. The provision of a room for the Health Visitor makes the service both child-friendly and accessible to members of this rural community and has led to early identification of potential problems. This could be even better if opportunities for modelling of good parenting were exploited, in line with the centre's philosophy of preventative work.

Assessment of needs is good with local intelligence as well as data informing provision. This is highly effective in identifying the hardest-to-reach groups. For example, the centre is working to redress the lack of domestic violence services through partnerships, signposting and training, also through parallel preventative work relating to alcohol abuse. As with domestic violence, the statistics for homelessness can mask the problem of teenage 'sofa-surfing' which the centre is aware of and is trying to address. The inclusive approach of the centre is successful in meeting the needs of most groups and is especially supportive of children with disabilities and their families. Gender differentials in attainment are being addressed and, although consultation with ethnic minorities indicates that they do not want anything different, there is a need to engage with greater numbers of these small groups.

Care, guidance and support is outstanding with various examples of people in crisis, turning up at the centre where the staff have responded quickly and appropriately, either by linking to services, signposting or simply a place to shelter or talk. 'A safe haven for children with difficulties' was one partner's way of describing it. Examples of where the centre has offered exceptional service are allowing the centre to be used when the special school attended by some of the community was closed for two weeks, and allowing the use of facilities when services, such as when phones have been cut off.

The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents	2
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and other users	
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all users	2
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?

2

Leadership and management are good at all levels with a relentless focus on providing quality services to meet user needs. The inclusive approach to provision ensures that the needs of most groups are met with some, for example, those with disabilities, being exceptionally well met. This is achieved through a strong team ethos, clear roles and responsibilities and performance management systems backed up by appropriate training and support. The centre's management of resources is outstanding with a range of services above and beyond that which would be expected with such a small budget. It is a credit to all staff that they manage to achieve so much. It is significant that the centre rooms are booked out for 90% of their opening time and that the work of the centre is so highly valued by local groups that they are willing to offer their facilities to continue the centre's work.

There are clear lines of accountability, at both local authority and centre level with the Advisory Board beginning to provide an appropriate mixture of challenge and support. The Parents' Forum is struggling to sustain itself and, although there are two parents on the advisory board, most parents' reluctance to be involved in what are viewed as very formal arrangements discourages wider representation on both groups. The centre is working hard to address this, including finding ways of encouraging youth representation.

Strategic planning and evaluation systems are in place but are largely driven by user views and feedback. Sustaining services depend on high levels of integration with a range of partners, as well as encouraging users to become involved in running their own services, for example, the Dads' group. With users at all levels demonstrating high levels of satisfaction and development, the centre now needs to expand its evaluation strategies to become more outcome-focused.

Safeguarding arrangements are well developed and understood by all members of staff as a result of continued training and discussion amongst the team. All recruitment checks are in place and a central register shows that Criminal Records Bureau checks are undertaken for all staff and volunteers. Risk assessments are routinely undertaken, including those by users themselves, and which keeps safety and safeguarding high on the centre's agenda. Effective multi-agency work and early

identification and intervention strategies ensure that the most vulnerable are protected.

The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day to day management arrangements are clear and understood	2
The extent to which ambitious targets drive improvement, provision is integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community	2
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	2
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	2
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	2

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Millom Children's Centre on 1 and 2 February 2011 and we judged the centre as good overall, with some outstanding aspects.

Thank you for your help and contribution to the inspection. It was especially good to hear from so many of you how much the centre has helped you and what a difference it makes to you, your children and families. My colleague and I were particularly impressed by the tales you told of how the centre responds in times of crisis and how much they listened to your views.

We were incredibly impressed by the amount of services provided by the children's centre, especially as they do not have a lot of space or money. We know that other

places work with the centre to share rooms and people and feel that the people of Millom get a very good deal. We realise that, without the centre providing many of these services, you would not be able to get to similar services in Barrow or Whitehaven. In particular, those of you with children with disabilities are very well supported by the centre and many of you feel you could not manage without them.

We heard from many of you how much the centre includes you in asking what you want and that your views have been taken into account, for example, in changing how enrolments for the play scheme are run. It would be great if more of you could be involved in the future of the centre by joining the Parents' Forum (it may sound formal but it's actually just a gathering) and maybe even by contributing to the Advisory Board.

We have suggested that the centre works out what works even better by checking how many of you are making progress, perhaps with how you help your children in their speaking or whether you and your family are eating more healthily.

Thank you to everyone who took the time to speak with us and we wish you every success in the future.

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