

Inspection report for Aylesbury (Southcourt) Children's Centre

Local authority	Buckinghamshire County Council
Inspection number	363495
Inspection dates	17–18 November 2010
Reporting inspector	Christine Davies HMI

Centre governance	Buckinghamshire County Council
Centre leader	Samantha Hornsby
Date of previous inspection	This is the centre's first inspection.
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Linked school if applicable	Oak Green School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Bambino Community Nursery

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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.

An inspection of the Bambino Community Nursery was carried out in October 2010 under Section 3 of the Childcare Act 2006. The report of this inspection is available on our website www.ofsted.gov.uk.

An inspection of Oak Green Primary School was carried out in July 2010 under Section 5 of the Education Act 2005. The report of this inspection is available on our website www.ofsted.gov.uk.

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an Early Years Inspector.

The inspectors talked to senior managers, advisory board members, parents, staff and representatives of partner organisations and volunteers. They observed the centre's work on the main site and at other locations and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Inspection judgements

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

Information about the centre

The centre provides the full core offer, grew from existing initiatives in the local community and was the first organisation in Buckinghamshire to become a Sure Start Children's in 2005. In 2008 the local authority commissioned the Healthy Living Centre, managed by Buckinghamshire NHS Trust, to run the centre. It is one of two run by the Trust. The chief officer managing the two centres is assisted by community development workers, play and outreach workers and a number of volunteers. An advisory board provides advice and monitors the centre's performance. Its membership includes a parent, local residents, representatives from

the further education college, business and community sector organisations and senior officers representing departments of the from Buckinghamshire County Council and elected members of Aylesbury Town, Aylesbury Vale District and the County Council.

The centre provides social and educational activities for children under five and their parents and/or carers living in a large housing estate and the town centre. It provides a range of advice, health and education services and outreach support to families in an area of considerable deprivation. The area is among the three most deprived in the county. Nearly half of the families in the area served live in social housing. The levels of unemployment and households claiming benefits are higher than the national average and are rising at a faster rate. The education, training and employment prospects for children growing up in the area are low. Deprivation due to ill-health and/or disability in families is the deepest concern. Nearly one-in-five adults in the area suffers chronic illness or disability, which is a growing proportion and is significantly worse than in other areas regionally and nationally. The majority of the population served, around 70%, is White British. Among the diverse mixed Asian, Black British, Caribbean and African minority ethnic groups there is an established community of Pakistani origin. Around 12% of these speak mainly Urdu and Pashto as first languages. Over 25 languages are spoken by children attending the local school.

The main site for the centre’s activities for children and their parents and/or carers is in a converted classroom with a fully enclosed outdoor play area at the school. The centre currently uses additional rooms, the crèche and community café at the Healthy Living Centre base, located approximately 10 minutes’ walk away. A new purpose-built premise for the centre is almost complete and due to be opened in April 2011. The centre uses outreach locations including schools, parks, Jobcentre Plus and the local further education college.

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

Aylesbury (Southcourt) Children’s Centre provides good support for children, their families and carers. The centre is well managed within a complex set of relationships between the local authority, health and education to provide a purposeful organisation with the vision to expand. Leaders and managers have a good understanding of the limitations of the current accommodation. They have taken

decisive action to provide coherent services for children and adults with disabilities and to provide more of their range of services under one roof.

The centre works hard to gain a rounded picture of its progress towards achieving ambitious targets. When there is no data available from partner agencies that is specific to the Southcourt area, such as a breakdown on teenage conceptions, the centre successfully gathers information through local contacts. Workers continually adjust the flexible programme of activities to improve the lives of some of the most hard-pressed families in the area. As a result the up-take of activities is high.

Inclusion and the emphasis on access for all groups in the diverse community are good. The centre acts effectively to overcome discrimination. Good partnerships are established with a very wide range of agencies and professionals. Good links with family learning providers, statutory child protection agencies, health service and education providers ensure that families know about and can access services. The centre keeps adequate records to analyse the use of the centre. It does not, however, keep information about languages spoken by users or their religions, which is needed for referral to some statutory agencies and for a full understanding of community cohesion in the area.

Safety of children and users is a high priority for the centre. The emphasis on nurturing and welcome by staff and volunteers adds to a sense of security for parents, which they say enables them to enjoy learning with their children in a relaxed environment. Prompt action is taken through statutory services for those at immediate risk, but the Common Assessment Framework is not used as often as it could be to start formal information sharing.

Good operational management and teamwork among the staff ensures that a richly varied programme of individual and group, play and learning activities is planned and takes place. The centre learns from comments made by users, partners and a qualified early years professional teacher. Staff and volunteers provide some excellent guidance for new mothers to help them feed and establish bonds with their babies. Promotion of healthy lifestyles is good and users confidently take health messages out into the wider community.

While most of the work of the centre is of good quality, the centre does not have a monitoring system in place to ensure consistency of quality over all groups on the programme and to drive improvement in children and parents' learning overall. Personal development for most children and their parents, including the high proportion who speak English as an additional language, is satisfactory and most children are adequately prepared for the start of school life.

Leadership and management and the use of resources are good and represent good value for money. Strong links exist between strategic planning, management and provision and the board has the skills to hold the centre to account. Morale is high as the staff look forward to their move to new premises. A thoughtful business plan is in place for the work now and after the move. The management structure is

satisfactory for the current work. Centre users' views are sought and acted on in a variety of ways and users feel confident to speak out about the type of provision they would like to see, such as women-only swimming sessions. Given the strong partnerships and achievements of the centre in contributing to inclusion in the area and better health and safeguarding for users, the centre has good capacity to build on its good provision and further improve outcomes.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- The centre should ensure that the quality of what it provides is regularly monitored and evaluated.
- To further promote partnership working, the centre should ensure that information sharing with other agencies is formalised through the Common Assessment Framework and that staff are fully equipped to use the Framework.

How good are outcomes for users?

2

Health outcomes are improving as a result of the centre's focus on promoting healthy living, which has led to impressive improvements to family well-being. The work of the centre in encouraging the families to take up what it offers, such as health visitor baby clinics, is widely recognised as successful by health and community partners. Babies who are vulnerable due to poor weight gain are now thriving because of regular health surveillance and consistent guidance by skilled professionals. Mothers who speak English as a second language loved role-playing in the 'English at the doctor's' course, which is now running for a second year. Popular 'Move and Munch' sessions are having a good impact on diet and exercise patterns of Asian families who may be more at risk of heart disease and diabetes. Families learn to cook healthy meals together and are spreading the word in the community. 'Baby's First Café' encourages a good percentage of mothers who use the centre to sustain breastfeeding. Users report improvement in their well-being through relaxation and baby massage sessions. The centre provides evidence of good success at encouraging users to stop smoking.

Children and the parents and carers who look after them are safe. The centre has improved the resilience of some women and children to deal with domestic violence in their lives. Users' feedback shows that they value its safe and confidential services. The centre provides a good service for those who have a statutory care plan or a Common Assessment Framework plan in place; alongside these arrangements, staff communicate regularly with other agencies and professionals to protect vulnerable children and families. However, the Framework is not used enough for information sharing. Although all workers have undertaken a good range of training on issues affecting the safety of families in community, such as drug abuse, some would like to develop expertise to be sure of identifying all families' needs. The school that provides the main setting for the centre's social play activities like 'Storytime and

Rhyme' was noted as an outstandingly safe and secure environment at a recent Ofsted inspection. Users see the centre's activities as secure for them no matter where they take place. Parents say that activities help their children to behave well and make safe choices.

Families attending the centre enjoy the activities and the extent to which they achieve educationally and develop skills for the future is satisfactory overall. Children begin at the centre from very low starting points. Many of those who can be followed up when they start school are assessed as still below average, particularly in communication language and literacy.

Although no formal Early Years Foundation Stage profile assessments are done in the centre, staff find that children develop positive attitudes to learning and acquire good social skills. However, learning for children and adults is limited because some activities, such as the well-attended 'Arty Crafty' sessions, are planned for too wide an age-range of children. The computer that is available is not always used to enhance children's or adult's learning, for example to find out more about the meaning of the Muslim festival of Eid when families were making greeting cards.

Childminders improve their assessment skills through working alongside lead practitioners in a weekly drop-in. Children and parents enjoy the group learning in messy play and scrapbooking family learning sessions, which for some parents is the first formal learning they have done since leaving school. Some parents are making the first steps to economic independence and stability because of the encouragement and support provided for them to find and start training courses. Children with targeted support from education psychologists and the speech and language team and who are monitored closely make good progress to catch up with their peers

All users are positively encouraged to comment on services; they make their views known through the forum 'Parents' Voice' and have brought about new activities such as the women-only swimming group.

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, and 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	2
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.	3

How good is the provision?

2

Information about the needs of individual children under five, their parents, extended families and carers is usually gathered in a wide variety of ways, direct from the users and from others working with them. Staff know their users very well and build up very good relationships. Partnership-working to assess needs is strong and brings in reliable information from health, education and social care services. Outreach workers are effective at identifying the needs of individuals and of groups, such as the emerging Polish Catholic community and recently arrived Romanians.

The centre promotes purposeful learning and development opportunities energetically through networks in the community and by visits to vulnerable families referred to the centre. The electronic directory of local services that outreach and other staff have built up over a number of years is highly praised as a useful resource by families. Users appreciate the provision that is suggested to them and the drop-out rate is low.

The quality of care, guidance and support is good as work is carried out in a warm, welcoming atmosphere that takes account of individuals' needs. Outstanding expertise is sometimes offered in small group work, such as baby massage, which is having a great impact on improving the parenting-skills of participants. Parents with and children with physical mobility disabilities are served adequately in the present accommodation, although there is limited access in the small crèche facility. The centre provides information on employment and training that is available locally for parents and carers. Most parents attending sessions on the programme that are open to all are happy with the information that staff provide that guides them on opportunities or courses that will suit their own circumstances. It also reaches out to Jobcentre Plus users and colleges to seek out younger parents with great success with the 'Tiny toes' group.

With services conveniently located close together, partners work effectively to protect the most vulnerable and ensure that children with special educational needs and/or disabilities are identified early and referred promptly. Parents with additional health needs are supported by centre workers who know them well to get access a range of specialist services. Continual communication between health, education and centre workers ensures that services go on working together effectively for families.

Children develop sound relationships with adults at the centre. Families who have been considered hard to reach say their time at the centre is enjoyable. The extent to which all groups are included is good. Adults and children treat each other with respect and are keen to learn about each other's backgrounds, languages and religious celebrations. To ensure that a full programme runs, workers sometimes take on roles for which they have not planned in sufficient detail, which reduces the quality of their direct work with children and their parents. Provision is good overall but would benefit from more formal monitoring of the services it provides.

The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users	2
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	2
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to users within the centre and the wider community	2

How effective are the leadership and management? 2

The arrangements for making decisions in the three-way agreement between the local authority, the Buckinghamshire NHS Trust and the centre are clear and workable. The advisory board provides useful challenge, based firmly on its range of accounting and business expertise and local connections. Senior leaders and managers have secured a wide range of partners who contribute strongly to the centre's understanding the population and the challenges facing them in the area.

Partnership work ensures services are integrated and add to cohesive provision for users that is improving users' lives, particularly on health issues. Partners understand their roles in helping the centre to provide the core offer of support and to look to an ambitious future for an even wider group of users. The inclusion of all children and their families successfully meets all statutory requirements and is central to the vision for relocation and expansion in the coming year.

Day-to-day operational management of the centre is good. Enthusiastic staff work hard to ensure that all planned activities take place and take account of comment from external partners. Staff appraisal systems are in place, although there is no system for regular monitoring and evaluation of the centre's programmes to assure consistent high quality. The locations at the school site and in the Healthy Living Centre in which the main activities are located are made safe, welcoming and as accessible as possible to all users within the present limited accommodation. Policies and procedures are closely aligned to those of key health and children's services partners. Good communication with partner agencies and professionals by staff at the centre ensures that action is taken to protect children and families at risk. The emphasis on nurture and welcome by staff and volunteers adds to a sense of security for parents, including fathers, which they say enables them to relax and enjoy learning with their children.

Evaluation of each activity is generally systematic and linked well to the centre's performance management cycle. Self-evaluation is evidence-based. The programme is designed to respond flexibly to users' expressed wishes through constant evaluation. Questionnaires, suggestion boxes and user-surveys adequately collect the views of literate English speakers and sufficient discussion takes place with those who cannot read or write or who speak English as an additional language. A limited range of views have been gathered through surveys of potential users. The

programme achieves good levels of satisfaction among users, many of whom get more involved with the centre's work through volunteering or on the 'Parent's Voice' forum.

Partnerships have a significant positive impact on the work of the centre. Systems to evaluate long-term improvements in users' lives are being developed with the local authority and other agencies. Some work is done to find out what children think of the activities. Together with partners, the centre is working towards an evaluation of impact on children's development in the Early Years Foundation Stage and later progress in school. Partners' contributions to evaluation enable the centre to target outreach services successfully and promote coherent planning, identifiably making an impact on families' attitudes to taking up learning and healthy lifestyles in the area.

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	2
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

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

None.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Aylesbury (Southcourt) Children's Centre on 17 and 18 November 2010. We judged the centre as good overall.

Inspectors thank the parents, carers and volunteers who gave their time to tell us about the work of the centre.

Those of you we spoke to told us how much you enjoyed the variety of activities which are active, fun, informative and help you and your children to learn. You also said you find the locations convenient on the whole and safe, secure and welcoming.

These are the main points of what we found from our visit:

- We found that the centre gives good support to children under five and their parents and carers. We agree with you that the programme of activities and visiting is well planned to help as many children and parents in the community as possible.
- The centre finds out as much as it can about the people living in the area to know what help they need to improve their own and their young children's lives. The centre asks as many people as possible what help and activities they would like. They also ask other organisations, like schools and health visitors, to make sure that workers are not all doing the same thing and are not leaving too many gaps.
- Attendance at the centre's activities is good. Some parents find the centre helpful because it gives them the first chance to take up learning since they left school. Parents we spoke to said they enjoyed reading and learning with their children at 'Storytime and Rhyme'. Many come back for more sessions of 'Scrapbooking' or 'Arty-Crafty'. We hear that you tell workers at the centre what activities you enjoy, like the 'Move and Munch', which helps them plan future events to suit you.
- Safety of children and users is a high priority for the centre, but this does not stop the centre from being warm and welcoming. The staff do as much as possible within the limited accommodation there is at the moment to include all groups in the community and to ensure that the services meet their needs.
- We found that the work done by the centre is having an effect on helping children and their parents develop and is helping with all-round health and well-being. In some cases the centre helps families overcome real safety difficulties in their lives. The centre works closely with other professionals when they are already involved. Workers help to put you in touch with specialist workers when you or your children have a particular need. The centre is helping some people find work and training.

- The centre has helped parents who speak English as an additional language to join in with activities. Also the centre puts on courses that have been a real practical help, such as the highly successful 'English at the Doctor's' sessions.
- We were really pleased to see that some parents get more involved with the work of the centre through volunteering or the 'Parents Voice' forum. It was good to hear that the centre started a women-only swimming group because parents asked for it.
- The higher levels of management and day-to-day management of the centre are good. We have made some recommendations about what the centre needs to do to make the centre even better. For instance, managers should be more systematic about checking the quality of the work going on and staff need to use the Common Assessment Framework more often for working with other professionals.
- The centre works well because it uses all its resources well. Staff and managers are looking forward to moving to the purpose-built centre in the spring of 2011 to improve what is on offer for an even wider range of children and their families.

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