

Inspection report for Caterpillars Children's Centre

Local authority	Kent
Inspection number	365659
Inspection dates	16–17 March 2011
Reporting inspector	Carole Skinner

Centre governance	Local authority
Centre leader	Linda Warner
Date of previous inspection	No previous inspection
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Linked school if applicable	Morehall Primary School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	

The inspection of this Sure Start children's centre was carried out under Part 3A of the Childcare Act 2006 as inserted by section 199 of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009.

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 additional inspector and one early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the acting team leader, two community involvement workers, representatives from the local authority, advisory board and local steering group. They also met with representatives of a number of partner agencies, including health professionals, Home-Start, adult education providers and the community warden, as well as with parents and carers. They observed the centre's work and looked at a range of relevant documentation, including evaluations of services, safeguarding policies and records, and minutes of meetings.

Inspection judgements

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

Information about the centre

The centre is run by the local authority and overseen by the Shepway Children's Centres District Advisory Board, which includes representatives of the local authority, centre managers, and representatives of key partner agencies. A steering group, consisting of representatives of local organisations, agencies, parents and carers, contributes to the strategic direction of the centre.

Caterpillars is a phase two centre which opened in March 2009. It is situated on the site of Morehall Primary School and sits adjacent to a privately run pre-school but has no formal links with either. The centre operates from 9am to 5pm from Monday to Friday. It does not provide childcare but offers a full range of services for parents and carers and children, including antenatal and well baby clinics, baby massage,

parent and child play opportunities and adult education. Two community involvement workers provide outreach services in other parts of the reach area, in addition to home visits and one-to-one support for families.

The centre is situated in one of the 40% most deprived wards in the country. Approximately 17% of children under five live in workless households. Just over 14% of families are eligible for working tax credits. The proportion of families from minority ethnic backgrounds is above average for Kent. Most are of Asian ethnicity and are either the families of the Ghurka regiment based at Shorncliffe Barracks or Nepali families who have chosen to settle in the area after serving in the British army. Children enter the Early Years Foundation Stage with skills and knowledge that are lower than those expected for their age, particularly in language and communication skills. The centre leader was on leave at the time of this inspection. She and the acting team leader have overall responsibility for Caterpillars and one other children’s centre in the Shepway district.

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

Caterpillars provides a warm and welcoming environment which is greatly appreciated by all who use it. One parent commented, ‘The staff are really helpful here’, while others were enthusiastic about the many and varied opportunities the centre provides for them and their children to play and learn together. Although it has only been open for two years, the centre has quickly established itself at the heart of the community. Centre leaders and staff know its users well and have a good awareness of their individual needs. They gain this information through successful partnerships with a range of agencies and the fruitful outreach work of the community involvement workers. Effective policies and procedures are in place to safeguard children and families. Centre staff promote mutual respect and cultural diversity and make every effort to include users from a variety of different backgrounds. They tailor services to meet the needs of groups and individuals and adapt them appropriately in the light of users’ evaluations and further requests. As a result, the wide range of activities on offer promotes purposeful and effective learning for children and their parents and carers. Children and adults alike acquire new skills and grow in confidence. Many parents spoke of how the centre has helped their children to socialise and has increased their own understanding of how their children learn.

The centre is having a beneficial effect on improving the health and well-being of its

users through a wide range of services in partnership with health professionals. Helping children and families to be safe is given high priority through talks, quizzes and effective liaison with the community warden, police and fire services. The centre is very successful in providing learning opportunities for adults through courses that lead to qualifications and prepare them for further education or work. As one commented, 'It bridges the gap between long-term stay-at-home mum and employment.' Although there are no formal links, close working relationships with the pre-school and primary school on the same site are mutually beneficial in helping to prepare children well for learning in the Early Years Foundation Stage. Well-coordinated services and carefully targeted advice and support all help to improve the life chances of children and their families.

The centre leader, well supported by all staff, is driving improvement in all aspects of provision with ambition and determination. Users make a good contribution to the running of the centre through the 'parent voice board', evaluations of every activity they attend and membership of the advisory board and local steering group. The centre's self-evaluation is accurate and systematic and informs the identification of priorities for its action plan. It takes into account users' views and input from the steering group and advisory board, which provide good levels of support and challenge. The good progress made by the centre since it opened in increasing the number of registered users and improving its services in response to their needs is indicative of its good capacity for continued improvement. Leaders make effective use of data from the local authority to identify key priorities for improvement in the reach area. They are implementing new systems for recording data about the different groups served by the centre and their take-up of services but these systems are in the early stages of development.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Refine and extend the centre's use of data about the different groups it serves by:
 - fine-tuning the systems for recording and analysing information about the take-up of services by the different groups in the reach area;
 - making increasingly rigorous use of data and other information gathered to measure the longer-term impact of services on the outcomes for users.

How good are outcomes for users?

2

Most expectant mothers in the reach area attend antenatal clinics at the centre and many attend the weekly well-baby drop-in clinics after the birth of their baby. The baby massage, Baby Caterpillars and Makaton baby signing groups all have a positive effect on the health and emotional well-being of babies and their families. The well-attended Breast Friends support group is helping to counteract the previous year's dip in the percentage of babies being breast-fed at six to eight weeks, which had previously exceeded the national average. Leaders are well aware of the need to do

more to tackle the higher than average levels of childhood obesity in the area and the centre provides a good range of activities to promote healthy eating and exercise. Good take-up of the Big Movers and Music and Movement groups enables children to benefit from well-organised physical activity. Adult users learn the importance of healthy eating through Fun with Food courses and the widespread distribution of Healthy Start literature.

Children make good progress in acquiring the basic skills they need to prepare them for school. The centre gives good attention to developing speech, language and communication skills and helps parents and carers to support their children's learning at home. Children behave well, grow in confidence and independence and learn how to socialise and share toys. This good provision is making a positive contribution to the rising attainment of children in the Early Years Foundation Stage within the reach area. Centre users are fulsome in their praise for the centre and thoroughly enjoy all the activities provided. As one commented, 'My daughter loves coming to mix with all the other babies and play with the toys.' Parents speak of the friendships they have formed and welcome the opportunity to talk about difficulties they may be experiencing, for example with breast-feeding, weaning and their children's behaviour. In addition to developing their parenting skills, a good number of users take advantage of the many opportunities to further their own education and readiness to return to work. Those who recently completed the 'Career Confidence' course were inspired and highly motivated to set ambitious goals for the future. One participant, typical of many, said, 'You come out of the course with the determination to reach all your goals.' Through this and other adult learning opportunities, many users gain additional qualifications and skills that raise their self-esteem and enhance their employability.

Strong security measures and regular risk assessments ensure that all are kept safe at the centre. Talks from the community warden on road safety and the use of car seats, together with advice from the fire service and police, give parents and carers a better understanding of how to keep themselves and their children safe. Individual advice and guidance, including effective partnership working with social services and the One-Stop-Shop through Home-Start, enable users who have experienced domestic violence to obtain valuable support. The centre works closely with social services and other agencies to ensure the safety of children who are subject to a child protection plan. All staff are fully trained in the Common Assessment Framework procedures and make a valuable contribution to meetings with social services and other agencies.

Some users contribute to the governance of the centre and evaluations show that they are becoming increasingly confident at expressing their views. As one user commented, 'I feel I can ask questions and give suggestions and my views and ideas are really listened to.' Users post their suggestions on the parent voice board and the centre responds, often by making the requested changes, such as more bean-bags to sit on and an awning for the outside play area to provide shelter from the sun. A number of users train as volunteers and contribute well to the running of the centre.

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	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	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 and employment	2

How good is the provision?

2

The centre capitalises on the high attendance at antenatal and postnatal clinics to promote its services to families and assess their different needs. Effective liaison with health and education partners provides valuable information about some groups and individuals in the reach area and they in turn publicise the centre's services. The centre takes good account of data provided by the local authority's statistician to inform its programme. For example, awareness of the higher-than-average percentage of emergency hospital admissions in the reach area gave rise to talks about accident prevention for those attending baby groups, an annual safety event and the distribution of home safety packs. Similarly, the centre identified a need to be more proactive in supporting the above average proportion of teenage parents in the reach area. The centre's collaboration with the Home-Start group for young parents is a step in the right direction and reflects leaders' continuous reassessment of needs and their efforts to engage hard-to-reach groups.

The range of activities on offer is frequently reviewed and has recently been modified, both in response to users' requests and to centre leaders' own evaluations of the impact of the activities on users' learning and development. For example, one group for toddlers was discontinued because it was not making sufficient contribution to children's basic skills as set out in the Early Years Foundation Stage guidance. There is now a greater awareness of the need to develop children's social and language skills, as well as issues such as keeping healthy, and activities and courses have a clear focus on these important aspects. The Music and Movement session for toddlers and parents combines both aspects in a fun hour of singing, dancing and learning nursery rhymes. A recent 'Story Sacks' course increased parents' understanding of the importance of reading to their child as they made the story sacks which they then used at home to help their children's reading development. The 10-week 'Learning Links' course is increasing parents' understanding about how their children learn and develop so that they are better equipped to help them at home. Parents greatly appreciate the good quality crèche provision that allows them

to attend courses.

Effective outreach work is extending the centre’s influence in the local and wider community. Partnership working with the Sano Nanee group for Nepali children and families from the army barracks is successfully engaging more of these families with the centre’s activities. Other ‘stay and play’ groups at a nearby primary school and the public library are well attended and have extended the centre’s reach to families who live beyond its immediate vicinity. Leaders are making increasingly effective use of data to identify vulnerable groups but acknowledge that they still receive too little intelligence about the needs of some hard-to-reach groups, such as lone parents and children and adults with disabilities. Leaders are pursuing ways to improve information-sharing strategies with other agencies in order to increase the number of families they support through outreach visits.

Excellent relationships between centre staff and users give families the confidence to seek advice and guidance about a wide range of issues, including debt crisis, domestic violence and housing issues. Home visits by outreach workers effectively meet the needs of an increasing number of parents and carers whose circumstances make it difficult for them to access services at the centre.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

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	2
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

Strong and effective governance arrangements ensure that decision making takes into account the views of users and key partners when determining the range of services offered. Centre managers are held accountable through regular meetings of the advisory board and local steering group, as well as the annual conversation with the local authority. Minutes of all these meetings and the centre manager’s quarterly reports demonstrate a clear commitment to continuous review and improvement and reflect the integrated approach established by the centre with its key partners.

Effective leadership and management at all levels ensure that the centre provides good value for money. All staff are strongly focused on matching services to the needs of users and demonstrate commitment to continuing improvement through increasingly rigorous self-evaluation. The centre has good systems for evaluating the quality of provision and its impact on individual users’ learning and development. For example, staff analyse users’ detailed evaluations of the courses and activities they

have attended and review whether they have met their stated objectives. Until recently, the centre has not been in a position to gather data to show its impact over the longer term. The local authority's roll-out of the E-Start system is facilitating the development of quantifiable data to evaluate the impact of services. Centre leaders have identified this as a priority for improvement in the well-structured action plan which clearly links proposed developments to national and local priorities and intended outcomes.

Effective partnerships with the privately run pre-school, Morehall Primary School and local childminders enable the centre to adapt its services to create a more coherent, integrated approach to delivering early childhood services in the reach area. Productive links with the local secondary school, Pent Valley Technology College, enrich the experiences of centre users, support students who are working towards childcare qualifications and facilitate outreach to teenage parents. The family learning courses offered by K College are greatly appreciated by parents and carers and contribute well to their learning and development, for example through the mathematics course that was provided in response to users' requests.

The centre demonstrates good practice in its policies and procedures for safeguarding children and adults. Recruitment and vetting systems are rigorous for centre staff, volunteers and those who are employed by external providers. Appropriate records are maintained. All staff are trained in and fully aware of child protection procedures and the protocols for making referrals to the relevant agencies. The centre works closely with social services and health professionals to ensure it follows up causes for concern but staff are seeking ways to gain more information about vulnerable families who may need support.

The centre demonstrates a strong commitment to the inclusion of all children and families and is focused on seeking out disadvantaged and vulnerable groups and individuals in the community in order to better meet their needs. Data show that the centre is contributing well to closing the gap between the lowest achieving 20% of children in the Early Years Foundation Stage and the rest. It is successfully engaging increasing numbers of Nepali families and providing services, such as dental health advice and help with learning English, to meet their specific needs. High-quality adult learning opportunities are benefiting many families by improving their education and skills and preparing them for employment. Centre leaders are well aware of the need for more local data about disabled and lone parents and are pursuing ways to improve access to this information.

User questionnaires and evaluations demonstrate high levels of satisfaction with the services provided. Parents and carers are encouraged to share their views through the parents' forum, which has now been in place for a year and has successfully contributed to the development of services. One request led to the provision of a family finance course with advice on budgeting and tax credits. The centre responded to requests to set up a group specifically for fathers and later rescheduled this to meet on Saturday which has increased attendance. Users also contribute to decisions about the content and costs of the summer holiday programme.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day-to-day management arrangements are clear and understood	2
The 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	2
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

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance *Complaining about inspections*, which is available from our website: www.ofsted.gov.uk. If you would like us to send you a copy of the guidance, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

Summary for centre users

We inspected the Caterpillars centre on 16–17 March 2011. We judged the centre as good overall.

We would like to thank those of you who took the time to come and meet with us and tell us what you think of the centre. We also looked at your evaluations of the sessions and courses that many of you have attended. We can see that you and your children thoroughly enjoy all the activities the centre provides. You told us that your children become more confident and learn how to play happily with others. It is good

that so many of you attend the midwife and health visitor clinics, as well as the breast-feeding support group, baby massage and 'Baby Caterpillars'. These good examples show that the centre is working hard to improve your health and well-being and those of your children. You receive good information about safety in the home and on the roads, for example from talks by the community warden, fire service and police and through annual events and a safety quiz. The centre keeps you and your children very safe when you take part in activities and also provides home safety packs to help you keep your children safe.

The centre is particularly good at arranging courses to extend your own education and it is encouraging to see how many of you have benefited from these. The enthusiastic response from those of you who took part in the 'Career Confidence' course was excellent. It was clear to see that it made a huge difference to you and boosted your confidence and skills enormously, so that you feel able to pursue your goals of obtaining work or moving on to higher education. Several of you said how helpful you found the 'Story Sacks' and 'Learning Links' courses in helping you to understand how your child learns and develops.

Centre staff take good account of your comments and suggestions when they plan and adapt activities. It is good to see that you contribute regularly to the 'parent voice board' and that the staff respond to your ideas. We are pleased to see that some of you play a part in checking how well the centre is doing and identifying priorities for improvement through the parent's forum, the steering group and the advisory board.

The centre provides you and your children with an interesting and stimulating variety of activities and services. The 'stay and play' groups are well attended, although some of you said you would like a toddler group at the centre itself rather than going to the activities at Harcourt or the library. All of the activities on offer provide good opportunities for you to make friends and share experiences with each other. Centre staff have recently improved some of the activities to make sure they focus more closely on developing your children's language and communication skills as they know this will get them off to a better start at school. You get on extremely well with the staff and feel comfortable about talking through your concerns with them. They take care to put you in touch with other agencies and organisations who can offer specific help and advice, for example about debt management, housing and domestic violence.

Centre leaders and staff have high expectations for you and your children and are committed to providing the best quality services possible to meet your needs. The local authority and the advisory board check how well the centre is performing and whether it is meeting the challenging targets that have been set. As the centre has only been open for two years, it is still developing systems for gathering data about all the different groups in the community it serves. We have asked centre leaders to develop sharper systems for gathering information so that they can measure how much difference the centre is making to the lives of all the different groups in the area. We have every confidence in their capacity to make further improvements as they have already achieved a great deal in a relatively short time.

We hope you will continue to support the centre and contribute to its development in the future.

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