

Inspection report for Aylesbury (Elmhurst) Children's Centre

Local authority	Buckinghamshire County Council
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Inspection dates	16–17 March 2011
Reporting inspector	Jane Wotherspoon HMI

Centre governance	Buckinghamshire County Council
Centre leader	Becky Hitchcock
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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Linked school if applicable	Not applicable
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Not 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.

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Introduction

The inspection addresses the centre's contribution to:

- facilitating access to early childhood services by parents, prospective parents and young children
- maximising the benefit of those services to parents, prospective parents and young children
- improving the well-being of young children.

The report is made to the local authority and a copy is sent to the children's centre. The local authority may send the report to such persons it considers appropriate and must arrange for an action plan to be produced in relation to the findings in this report.

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an early years inspector. The inspectors held meetings with the centre's staff, a representative from the local authority, members of the advisory board, members of the parents' forum, and representatives from some of the centre's partners. They had informal discussions with parents and users of the services. They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of documentation including case studies, a range of key policies, the centre's self-evaluation documents, its business plan and action plan, and data about the people who use the centre. They considered some evaluations of sessions completed by users.

Information about the centre

The centre serves the residential areas of Elmhurst and Watermead in North Aylesbury. It is a phase two centre originally designated in March 2007 and reaching the full offer for such a centre in May 2009. The centre is located in part of a large building that includes a primary school and other local authority services. The local community centre is located in the building next door. The centre's buildings and rooms are used in the evenings and at weekends by a number of partners and community groups.

The area that the centre serves has pockets of deprivation. Information from the 2001 census show that approximately half those aged 16–74 are in full-time employment. Around a quarter of this age group have no qualifications. Around 17% of dependent children live in workless households. The majority of the community, 71%, are of White British heritage. Of the remaining 29% from minority ethnic groups, the largest are Asian or Asian British at 11% of the community. Children's levels of skills and experiences are lower than is typical for their age, especially in language development, when they start school.

The centre works with a number of partners to provide health services and family support services but does not provide early years provision. Staff provide advice and guidance to users about other services locally, particularly those provided in the five

other children's centres in Aylesbury. The centre is governed directly by the local council to whom it is accountable for its effectiveness. A parents' forum and an advisory board advise the centre's staff on the type of services to offer the community. Until very recently, the centre's advisory board was shared by three other centres in Aylesbury.

One full-time and one part-time family support worker provide services for the community under the leadership of the centre coordinator, who was appointed in January 2010 following a period of interim coordination. She also coordinates the services at another children's centre in Aylesbury, spending approximately 50% of her time in each centre. Significant staffing difficulties during 2010 included absence through sickness and a period of approximately six months when a family support worker had left and was not replaced.

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

3

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

3

Main findings

On a day-to-day basis activities run smoothly. Satisfactory outcomes for children and families are underpinned by the satisfactory provision. The centre is doing some good work with individual families who benefit from the good partnership working of the various services that operate from the centre. Parents and carers feel comfortable in the centre and know they will get a warm welcome from the staff. Users told inspectors they consider it a 'safe haven'. The centre's approach to safeguarding the well-being of users in and around the centre ensures that all are aware of the need to be vigilant.

The centre went through a difficult time during 2010 when staffing difficulties took much of the centre coordinator's efforts and energy. When staff left, a freeze on recruitment resulted in low staffing levels which curtailed some of the centre's activities. During this period, partners continued to work in the centre but the level of outreach work in the community was more limited, as was the range of activities provided directly by centre staff. A new team is now in place and services are being rebuilt after a period of inadequate staffing. Participation rates are rising and users reflect the social and ethnic mix found in the community. The commitment of the

centre's staff to improving the services for the community they serve is in no doubt and they are keen to move forward together.

Staff seek the views of current users to help them evaluate which services are meeting the needs of users and what could be improved. This feedback gives the staff a general view of what needs improvement and services are modified as a result. The parents' forum has a key role in this regard and offers much anecdotal feedback. However, the role of parents, carers and service users in making decisions about the centre's long-term development is more limited. The new advisory board has met only once and is yet to demonstrate that it functions effectively in holding the centre to account for its work and in helping to set ambitious targets. Nonetheless, its first meeting set some tentative priorities for the coming year. The local authority sets targets for the centre in terms of numbers of registered users and numbers participating in activities – some of which the centre is exceeding - but does not set targets that will help the centre set its own ambitious goals and measure outcomes for users.

Self-evaluation processes are not as sharp as they could be to ensure that the centre's staff have a clear view of how well the centre is operating in the short term and its impact in the longer term. Planning for improvement is not detailed and does not set clear and measurable targets by which staff can judge whether or not they have been successful. To some extent, these weaker aspects of leadership and management reflect the absence of relevant and up-to-date data from the local authority about the make-up of the community. This means that the centre finds it difficult to ensure that it is identifying and targeting the groups and individual families who have the greatest need for its services. In addition, although partners who work at the centre share information appropriately in order to meet the needs of individual families, there are no protocols for sharing information with other services at a strategic level that would help the centre in its work.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- The local authority should provide:
 - accurate and up-to-date information about the area served by the centre
 - clear direction for the centre's work through setting ambitious targets.

- The new advisory board should:
 - strengthen its role in holding the centre to account for its effectiveness and in setting priorities for its development
 - ensure that it has appropriate levels of representation from users and the wider community in order to provide objectivity in its governance role.

- The centre should develop systems for monitoring and evaluating the impact of its work by:

- ensuring that action plans have sufficient detail and clear targets through which to demonstrate improvement in outcomes for users
- devising ways of tracking impact in the longer term
- using data on the area it serves to reach those families that would benefit from its services.

How good are outcomes for users?

3

The outcomes for parents and carers and families who use the centre are satisfactory and the numbers coming to sessions are growing. Parents and carers appreciate the support they receive and say that they feel comfortable and safe. Various training sessions on safety have resulted in some families going on to have home safety checks. The centre is effective at supporting the social and emotional needs of some families who are vulnerable and have undergone assessment under the Common Assessment Framework. The 'Holding Hands' programme, for example, is providing valuable support to help parents and carers communicate and play more effectively with their children. Safeguarding policies and procedures are clear and there are visible reminders for parents and carers of the safe and healthy practice expected when they bring their children into the centre.

Partnerships with health professionals are helping to raise awareness of general health issues with leaflets and advice on healthy eating, smoking cessation and breast-feeding. The latter has been identified as a priority for the coming year because figures are not improving. Informal sharing of information with health visitors helps in the planning of services. For example, the provision for dental health was increased after health visitors had identified a need in the area. Also, there is now a group especially for grandparents after some had expressed concerns over being in the company of younger carers and parents. However, formal evaluation is underdeveloped and does not routinely support planning to ensure that wider community needs are met.

Parents and carers enjoy the opportunity to meet others and to get informal support and advice. In the 'Smiling faces, healthy bodies' play session, the children enjoyed playing with the good range of toys and each other, followed by a healthy snack. There were some missed opportunities for the centre staff to model effective play approaches and relationships. Although there is anecdotal evidence that children make progress as a result of coming to the centre, there is no system in place to track progress in the Early Years Foundation Stage, and achievement there remains low. An emphasis on developing parents' skills to support children's learning is provided in the Wider Family Learning group. Here, parents and carers made books to share with their children at home. They felt that, as a result of this course, they had gained confidence in reading and saying rhymes with their children and were more able to help with their children's learning generally. It is difficult for the centre to track longer-term outcomes from these sessions as they do not have access to information on the number of parents and carers who go on to follow other courses and gain more educational qualifications.

Jobcentre Plus is unable to staff sessions at the centre and so alternatives are being sought. A drop-in session attended by a Next Steps adviser was a positive experience for one mother who attended the session observed during the inspection. She received some very helpful guidance on writing her CV and was offered some follow-up support to discuss it further. The centre provides a wide range of leaflets and advice about adult learning, but a lack of protocols on sharing information means that it is difficult for the centre to track the impact of their advice on the number of adults who go on to employment.

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	3
The extent to which children are safe and protected, and their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	3
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 and employment	3

How good is the provision?

3

Significant staffing issues adversely affected the services offered by the centre last year. Since December, the new team has made progress and the quality and range of provision are satisfactory. Systems for assessing the needs of the children and families who use the centre are secure and the needs of these families are well known and understood. Effective informal contact between partners means that individual families are offered appropriate support and care, which one mother described as 'a life saver'. Several case studies also tell of the centre's significant success in meeting the specific needs of individual families and children. Where necessary, the centre is also proactive in ensuring that other agencies are involved and they work hard to advise parents about other services, such as Citizens Advice Bureau, where this would be helpful. The centre acts as host to meetings of the many professionals involved in working with families who have been assessed under the Common Assessment Framework to ensure that there is coherence to the elements of support.

The identification and assessment of the needs of the wider community is underdeveloped and more needs to be done to reach out to families in the community who might benefit from the centre's services. The centre does not have access to relevant and up-to-date data on the local area and this makes it more difficult for them to identify needs more widely and, in turn, modify the courses they

offer. For example, partners and centre staff recognise that they could improve their offer to Asian families in the area.

The number of users attending sessions has improved from last year but participation and attendance in some sessions remains low. The centre is not rigorous in investigating why this is happening in order to take appropriate action to improve figures through advertising the centre more widely in the community. Professionals sometimes miss opportunities to tell the families they work with about the centre and what it offers.

Many parents, carers and users are happy with the service they receive. The centre regularly seeks their views on the courses they have attended and takes account of their satisfaction levels when planning future sessions. Sessions for parents and carers such as 'rhyme time' and 'bookstart' are leading to improved parenting skills and increasing parents' and carers' confidence in helping children's learning at home but there is no evidence to show that these achievements are built on. The centre does not have strategies in place to judge the impact of these courses in the longer term.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users	3
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's staff are committed to the community they serve and to improving the services they offer. Day-to-day management is well organised, professional supervision is conducted regularly and staff have clear targets for their work. The centre's staff team know what they want to improve and they identify priorities on the basis of anecdotal evidence, such as feedback from partners. However, the quality of the information they receive on the demographics of the area does not support staff in extending their reach into the wider community. As a result, the centre finds it difficult to target its support to the families in the greatest need.

The centre's action plan is too brief and lacks clear targets by which success can be measured in terms of impact on users. The systems for challenge and accountability are in place but are not sufficiently rigorous. It was recognised that the advisory board in its previous format was not functioning well and changes have been made since January. However, the membership of the new board does not yet adequately represent the breadth and diversity of the community. It is yet to establish a

systematic approach to taking account of feedback from the parents' forum. The board is not sufficiently involved in setting targets to drive improvement.

The centre's staff are welcoming and accommodation is well used. Partners enjoy coming here and they say that staff are friendly and accommodating. Outdoor resources are well presented and looked after and there are good-quality toys and books. The centre's coordinator recognises that outreach services are not yet reaching the wider community but they are beginning to improve now that the centre has a full complement of family support workers. Collaborative working between the wide range of partners is good. Some partners are involved in planning and there are examples of services being withdrawn if they are underused in order to secure satisfactory value for money. Nonetheless, formal evaluation of the centre's effectiveness is not rigorous enough to provide a platform for strategic planning.

Good strategies to narrow the achievement gap include the 'Holding Hands' programme which provides help and support for those families where parents and carers find it difficult to engage with their children and the 'explorers playgroup' for children with additional learning needs. In some sessions, there is a good ethnic mix where parents and carers socialise and enjoy the opportunity to meet a wider range of people. Sessions targeted to particular groups, for example Polish families, have encouraged their attendance at the centre as well as greater involvement with the community.

Policies on child protection are clearly understood by staff who are confident in their knowledge of what to do if they have a concern. The centre's coordinator has had appropriate training for her role as the designated member of staff for child protection but is awaiting refresher training. The centre undertakes appropriate checks on staff during recruitment, although there has been some delay in obtaining assurance from partners that their staff have had appropriate clearance. The centre's staff contribute effectively to core meetings held by social services and facilitate meetings of professionals to ensure that multi-agency support is coordinated to meet the needs of individual families and children.

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	3
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	3

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

Not applicable

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Aylesbury (Elmhurst) Children's Centre on 16 and 17 March 2011. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

During the inspection, we held meetings with the centre's staff and some of the other people who work from the centre. We were pleased to be able to talk to some of you about the centre and the activities it provides for you. I would like to thank the people who came to the centre specially to meet with us. We took account of the views of all the people we met when we made our judgements about the centre. We also looked at some of the evaluations that you had completed for the centre about the sessions you attend.

Some of you told us that you appreciate the support you receive at the centre. You say that you feel comfortable and safe there. Centre staff offer a warm welcome to people attending sessions and are always ready with leaflets of advice about where you can get the help you need. The centre is doing some good work with individual families who benefit from the good partnership working of the various services that operate from the centre. The centre supports your needs well when you need it most. The centre tries to put on activities for different groups of people. There is now a group especially for grandparents but the centre does not always know, for sure, if there are other groups in the community who need their help and support.

We heard about the training sessions on safety that some of you have attended in the past and that these have led you to have home safety checks. The centre helps you to help your children in their learning. We heard about a programme called 'Holding Hands' which has helped some parents and carers understand how their children learn and develop. The mothers at the Wider Family Learning group who were making books told us how they feel more confident with reading stories and saying rhymes with their children. We saw that you enjoy the opportunity to meet with others and to get informal support and advice at some of the groups. In the play session, 'Smiling faces, healthy bodies', the children enjoyed playing with the toys before having a healthy snack.

We know that the centre had some staffing difficulties during 2010. This meant that they were not getting out and about in the community to tell people about their services. They did not provide so many services at this time, although the partners, such as health services, carried on as normal. You have probably noticed a few new faces at the centre. This new team is keen to get things going again and more people are starting to come to the centre's activities. Sometimes, though, some services are not well supported.

We have asked the centre's staff to find different ways of checking how well they are doing and what difference they are making to your lives, both in the short term and in the long term. It is difficult for the centre to find out how well adults do if they go on to gain other qualifications or go back to work. When they have better information, we think they will be better able to plan for the future and ensure that they provide for some of the people that are not yet using the centre. To help them do this, the centre staff need more up-to-date information about the community and about the needs of the people in it. So, we have asked that the council help to get this information for the centre and give the centre some targets to help staff focus their planning.

Staff ask you what you like about the centre and listen to your views when they think about what activities to put on. Some ideas come from the members of the parents' forum. This is a group of parents, carers and users who get together regularly to talk about the centre's activities. This small group has space for more people so if you are interested in joining them, do get in touch with the centre. At present, there are no parents, carers or users on the advisory board. This group of people meets to discuss how well the centre is doing and how it should develop. It has a lot of new members and is not yet working in the way it should. So we have suggested that it needs to be stronger in the way it works and needs to have people from the wider community involved in its work.

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