

Inspection report for The Rowans Children's Centre

Local authority	Milton Keynes
Inspection number	365532
Inspection dates	29-30 March 2011
Reporting inspector	Champak Chauhan

Centre governance	Action for Children
Centre leader	Sarah McGrory
Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
Centre address	13A Moorfoot Fullers Slade Milton Keynes MK11 2BD
Telephone number	01908 565852
Fax number	01908 261455
Email address	Sarah.McGrory@actionforchildren.org.uk

Linked school if applicable	Not applicable
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	The Rowans Nursery

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.

Published: April 2011



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Royal Exchange Buildings
St Ann's Square
Manchester
M2 7LA

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.ofsted.gov.uk

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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 an additional inspector and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the senior leaders and other staff of the centre, members of the advisory board, parents, staff from the local authority and representatives from partner organisations. They observed the centre's work on the main site and outreach work in Wolverton, and they looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

The Rowans Children's Centre opened in August 2006 and it is managed by Action for Children as a commissioned service for Milton Keynes Council. Action for Children and the centre's advisory board are accountable to the council. The centre is purpose built on one site and it covers the areas of Stony Stratford, Wolverton, Fuller Slade, Galley Hill, Greenleys, Hodge Lea and Stacey Bushes. About two thirds of the estates in the centre's area are among the most disadvantaged in Milton Keynes. The area is predominantly White British and about one third of the population is from minority ethnic backgrounds. Just over half the children aged four and under are registered with the centre and 13% of such children live in workless households. Almost one third of families benefits from working tax credit.

The centre commissions services from various organisations and works with a number of statutory, voluntary and private bodies, for example Pre-School Learning Alliance, Oral Health, the educational psychology service and Citizens' Advice Bureau. The range of services offered includes baby massage, swimming sessions, computer skills for adults, health advice, childminders' group, bumps and babes, jump and jive and a fathers' group. Some services, however, are being decommissioned from April 2011 because of financial constraints. The centre has a 48-place nursery on site, run by Milton Keynes Council. Children's levels on entry to early years' provision are generally below average.

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

The Rowans Sure Start Children's Centre has many strengths and its services are highly valued by the community it serves.

Staff from the centre are very knowledgeable about local needs through their long-standing involvement with the community and through strong working relationships with other agencies and services, for example health visitors, midwives and the community mobiliser, the last of which is a voluntary sector service that focuses on development work with the local community. A good range of services is offered after a thorough evaluation of users' needs by senior leaders and others. Such evaluation takes into account the views of users, which are regularly sought through formal and informal means. Many services are regularly assessed for their effectiveness and a few have been reconfigured, and in some cases decommissioned, so that needs can be better met. Some services, for example, have been pruned back and the resources freed have been targeted more to meeting local needs. Firm action to improve outcomes has been taken by the strong senior leadership team which provides clear leadership and direction to the work of the centre. The pace of improvement has been rapid over the last year and this has been driven by the identification of appropriate priorities and the setting of ambitious targets. Such action is being taken against a background of financial cuts. Appropriately high expectations are evident in the work of the centre and, despite the loss of some services, staff morale is high. Consequently, the centre has a good capacity to sustain the pace of improvement. The centre has strong evaluation procedures to assess the short-term impact of its work. However, it does not have regular access to key data from the local authority or the health service to enable it to properly assess its impact over the longer term.

The clear direction to the work of the centre and the hard work and dedication of the staff are leading to good outcomes for children and their families. Users make good progress in all aspects of their personal, social and emotional development. They know how to adopt healthier lifestyles through healthier cooking and by having a more balanced diet. The centre has a strong focus on keeping children safe. Not only are children made aware of dangers but parents are taught about dangers in the

home and basic first aid. Safeguarding procedures are thorough and risk assessments are regularly undertaken.

The strong emphasis on care means that both parents and their children achieve well in the activities offered to them. The sessions on story, songs and rhymes, for instance, have high attendance rates and children make good progress in developing their communication and language skills. Parents say how much they and their children enjoy the activities. The friendly and welcoming environment helps to foster good relationships, and children behave well. Users are constantly encouraged to participate in the decision-making process and parents are members of the advisory board. Parents' views are also sought through the recently formed parents' forum. The centre makes every effort to promote users' economic and social well-being. As a result, children are prepared well for their future and adults are given a good range of information, advice and support to help them secure economic stability and independence. The centre runs courses to enable adults to develop their skills in literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology. However, attendance at these sessions is low and their impact is limited.

The good outcomes for children and their families are a result of the strong ethos of inclusion which permeates everything that the centre does. Individuals from all backgrounds, including those with special educational needs and disabilities, are integrated well within the centre. The centre's work with fathers is notably successful and their attendance at sessions is relatively high. Some particularly effective outreach work has been undertaken with mothers and children of South Asian origin, and the staff have worked intensively with some families from other parts of the world, including South America, Africa and Eastern Europe. The centre also successfully runs sessions for physically disabled children, some of whom have complex cognitive and medical needs.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Ensure that the local authority and the health service routinely gather and share relevant data with the centre to enable it to better evaluate the long-term impact of its work.
- Ensure that the key skills of literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology are better developed for adult users.

How good are outcomes for users?

2

Children and families are developing a good understanding of how to keep themselves healthy and to stay safe. Mothers are more aware of weaning, and the breast feeding sessions, for example, support them to sustain breast feeding for longer periods. Ante-natal classes run by midwives are well attended by expectant mothers. The centre promotes healthier lifestyles well with a good range of activities.

Healthy cooking sessions for mothers and children are developing a good understanding of a balanced diet and there is good awareness of improving oral hygiene. Parents and children learn about more active lifestyles through participation in swimming sessions and other activities, for example jump and jive and soft play. The 'mini-strikers' sessions are particularly well attended. The centre has a large covered outdoor play area and the children are encouraged to play outside whatever the weather. Parents are encouraged to walk to the centre and the staff go out on 'buggy walks' with parents and their children to encourage physical fitness.

There is a strong ethos within the centre to ensure that children are kept safe and protected. This starts with the induction pack for new parents, which contains basic safety equipment to be used at home, such as safety catches and plug guards. Parents are aware of how to use this equipment and they also learn basic first aid skills to help them deal with minor emergencies. Children behave in ways that are safe for themselves and others. Information, home visits by staff and attendance at sessions ensure that parents have a good understanding of how to keep their families safe. One mother, for example, had difficulties in managing the challenging behaviour of her child and the centre successfully helped her manage the situation better. Users report that they feel safe at the centre and some use it as a haven in times of crises in their personal lives. Procedures for implementing the Common Assessment Framework are in place and staff have been trained in its use. The good multi-agency cooperation ensures that there are good outcomes for children on child protection plans.

The structured activities ensure that the needs of the children are met well. Many activities are undertaken with parents, and this enhances their knowledge and understanding of child development. The sessions on story, songs and rhymes, for example, support the development of key areas, such as speech and language and personal development, and parents play an active part in this during the sessions. They are also encouraged to use particular activities at home with their children. As one parent commented, 'Seeing her playing with the Treasure Basket has really made me think. I'll have to do one at home.' Parents with English as an additional language reported that the story, songs and rhymes sessions had helped their and their children's acquisition of English. The close working relationship with the adjoining nursery ensures that the educational needs of the children are better met and there are discernible improvements in their achievements. Children aged four in the local area have made significant improvements in their achievements and most attain age-related expectations, with some attaining significantly higher than this. The gap between the bottom 20% and the rest in this achievement is being markedly reduced.

Children develop good relationships with each other and with adults. Parents treat each other with respect and encourage their children to do the same. The centre promotes good relationships and good community cohesion. The toddlers' group in Wolverton, for example, started for mothers of South Asian origin but has now broadened its membership to include others. The centre welcomes the views of its users and many offer constructive feedback to staff on how to improve services. This

is done through ingenious ways, such as the use of a 'sharing tree' display on the wall where parents can make comments on individual paper leaves. The centre is looking at ways of including more users in the decision-making process. The centre's role in the community is good, and there are clear signs that it is improving. Outcomes for adults are improving because of the good information, advice and guidance provided by the centre. There are some notable successes where individuals have gained professional qualifications to pursue careers, for example in child care. Other users have been supported in finding employment through referral to agencies such as Jobcentre Plus. Too few users, however, are improving their basic skills by attending courses provided by the centre.

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 and employment	3

How good is the provision?

2

Staff from the centre assess the needs of users well through their good knowledge of the local community. Good partnership working with various agencies ensures that vulnerable families are quickly identified. Users are constantly encouraged to identify any needs that are not being met and many do so. For example, when a service was decommissioned the centre decided to inform parents more about the Early Years Foundation Stage to enable them to help their children make better progress. As a result, parents have been requesting more detailed information about this aspect. Parents report that they and their children thoroughly enjoy the activities that the centre offers them. Many speak highly of the centre's work, including one who said, 'This centre is awesome.' Parents value the hard work of the staff and report that their parenting skills, for example, have been significantly enhanced.

Some particularly effective work has been done with individual mothers and children from minority ethnic backgrounds who have been helped with learning English to enable them to gain further qualifications and to seek employment. Work of this nature is complemented well by successful outreach work with a toddlers' group in Wolverton. A bilingual worker has been successful in increasing and sustaining good attendance at this group. The mothers are not only improving their parenting skills but improving the language and communication skills of their children. The centre

staff have also worked successfully with individual families from other parts of the world.

The centre meets the needs of users and the wider community well. Participation rates in its activities are generally good. The effective partnership working enables a good range of services to be provided. The centre acts as the hub of the local community and organises annual events which attract wide participation. A community safety event, organised in summer 2010, involved a wide range of organisations, including the police and the fire service, and it attracted about 150 people. The strong desire of the staff and partners to work with the community has led to good quality of care, guidance and support. The family support workers, for example, have detailed knowledge of the needs of local families and their young children. Where the centre cannot meet needs itself, good information is provided about agencies which can help, for example the Citizens Advice Bureau. Good information is also provided about the misuse of alcohol and smoking cessation. The centre is particularly successful in helping families facing crises, be it domestic violence, bereavement or post-natal depression. One mother said that the centre offered her a lifeline at a critical time in her life.

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

Senior leaders, Action for Children and the advisory board offer clear leadership and direction to the work of the centre. The service manager and the deputy, who have both been appointed within the last year, are ensuring that provision meets users' needs. They have high expectations for the users and the wider community. Staff appreciate their caring but pragmatic approach and morale remains high despite uncertainties about funding. Senior leaders are driving the centre forward through the identification of appropriate priorities based on ambitious targets. This is done through rigorous monitoring and evaluation procedures. These include the systematic gathering of evidence, the observation of sessions to evaluate their impact on the personal development of children and adults, and feedback from users. The leaders have an accurate understanding of the centre's strengths and weaknesses.

Appropriate action is taken if services do not meet the needs of users, including decommissioning. However, the lack of relevant data from the local authority and the health service restricts leaders' ability to evaluate the long-term impact of the centre's services. Good communications exist between the centre and the partners it works with. All partners understand their roles and responsibilities and integrated

provision permeates the work of the centre. The staff are dedicated and hard working, and the centre functions well on a day-to-day basis. Lines of accountability are clear and they are managed well by the senior leaders. The performance management system allows them to identify further training which is subsequently undertaken. Such support is valued by the staff. The advisory board meets regularly. It supports the work of the centre well and is now strengthening its role by providing a greater degree of challenge.

Rigorous safeguarding procedures ensure that all staff, volunteers and members of the advisory board have enhanced clearance from the Criminal Records Bureau. Safer recruitment procedures are followed. The centre has adopted recommended good practice from the local authority and Action for Children. Awareness of safeguarding issues is high among staff and agencies working in the centre. Relevant policies and procedures are in place, and these are regularly reviewed. Multi-agency work involving early intervention has been particularly effective with certain families and children whose quality of life has improved as a result. The centre has been especially successful in enhancing the emotional health and well-being of some users, especially mothers who struggle with raising their children and others experiencing, for example, mental health problems. The family support workers and the educational psychologist help through intensive work with individuals, through parenting classes, or referring them to Relate. Some users were very complimentary about the work of the centre in this respect. The centre acts when it becomes aware of cases of domestic violence and has been successful in helping victims and their families.

Children with disabilities are fully integrated into the work of the centre. Their needs are met and a group with complex physical, emotional and learning needs meets every month at the centre. Staff awareness of issues regarding equality and diversity is high and the centre is very welcoming to people of all backgrounds. This is also reflected in its resources. Concerted action is taken to engage families from South Asian and African origins. Notable successes have resulted with some of them and their children and the quality of their lives has improved. The centre has good strategies to ensure that the needs of all are met, including the good use of bilingual volunteers. The centre manages the resources available to it efficiently. Planning is effective, vulnerable groups are targeted, and staff are effectively used. Sustainable services are being developed and outcomes are good. As a result, the centre provides good value for money.

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

Not applicable

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Summary for centre users

We inspected The Rowans Centre on 29 and 30 March 2011. Thanks to all of you who found the time to speak to us. We judged the centre as good overall.

Those of you who spoke to us were very complimentary about the centre's work and we believe, like you, that it has many strengths. Staff from the centre are very knowledgeable about the needs of the local community and a good range of services is offered to you and your children. This is done in conjunction with other agencies, for example health visitors, midwives and the educational psychology service. Partnership working with other agencies and services is a particular strength of the centre and this enables an integrated and cohesive service to be offered to you and your children. The wide range of sessions run by the centre include baby massage, breast feeding, jump and jive, mini-strikers, playing together, story, songs and rhymes. A toddlers' group meets at Wolverton and there is a group for fathers which meets every month on a Saturday. There are drop-in sessions where you can meet

other people and centre staff to discuss any issues or to make new friends. Many of these activities are well attended, especially the group for fathers, and you value the opportunities to play and learn with your children. Many of you said to us how much you enjoy attending these activities. In addition to these sessions, the centre offers you a good range of information to help and support you. This is provided through, for example, the Citizens Advice Bureau and Jobcentre Plus.

As a result of all it provides, the centre enables you and your children to make good progress in your personal development and learning. You and your children are made more aware of how to lead healthier lifestyles through healthier cooking and having a more balanced diet. Your levels of physical fitness are improved through the jump and jive sessions, for example, and through being encouraged to walk more with your children. You know more about how to keep your children safe. The centre does this well by teaching you about potential dangers that children can face, both inside and outside the home. The centre gives you some important basic safety equipment to use at home, for example safety catches and plug guards, and it teaches you more about basic first aid. The centre has good systems to keep you and your children safe. Staff, volunteers and others are appropriately vetted. Risk assessments are regularly done. All staff have undergone training in child protection and good procedures exist to ensure that staff work with other agencies so that your children are kept safe. Your children achieve well in the activities offered and they are prepared well for starting school. They behave well. The centre encourages all adults to become more independent and it offers good advice and training in this. It runs sessions to improve your literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology skills. Only a few of you attend these sessions so their impact is limited.

The centre is friendly and welcoming to all groups of people. Your views are regularly sought to enable the centre to become even better and many of you put these forward to the centre staff, or make comments on the 'sharing tree'. Your views are valued by the staff and the senior leaders act on them when appropriate. A parents' forum has recently been established. Some of you attend this and the centre is trying to get more of you involved with the advisory board.

The centre has undergone some profound changes over the last year with the appointment of a new senior leadership team. Some rapid and sustained improvements have been made in a relatively short time. Some hard decisions have recently been made and some services have had to be withdrawn. Senior leaders have tried hard to ensure that the level of provision for the future best meets the needs of you and your children. They have done this through the collection and evaluation of a good range of data, and through seeking the views of users and partners. However, they do not always have access to relevant data which should be provided to them by the local authority and the health service to enable them to assess the long-term impact of the centre's work.

The centre has many strengths, but to make it even better we have asked it to ensure that more of you take advantage of the opportunities to develop better skills in literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology. We have also

asked the local authority and the health service to gather and share relevant data with the centre to enable it to better evaluate the long-term impact of its work.

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