

Inspection report for Snodland Children's Centre

Local authority	Kent
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Centre governance	Local authority
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Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
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Linked school if applicable	
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.

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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 centre manager, the local authority's preventative services manager, members of the advisory board, the community involvement worker, the early years practitioner, representatives of partner organisations and users of the centre.

They observed the centre's work 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 is run by the local authority and is located in a building that is owned by the Primary Care Trust, where health visitors, district nurses and the community podiatrist are based. The Tonbridge and Malling Children's Centres District Advisory Board oversees the centre, along with seven other centres in the district. The recently restructured Service Development Group, consisting of representatives of local organisations, agencies, parents and carers, contributes to the strategic direction of the centre. The centre manager has responsibility for four other centres within the local network.

Snodland is a phase 2 centre which was designated in March 2008. Until September 2010, when it moved into its present accommodation, it was run from a number of temporary sites due to difficulties in locating suitable premises. The current premises consist of two small offices. The children's centre also makes use of the clinic room at times when it is not being used by health visitors. Additional services are provided in the local community centre and a church hall.

The centre operates from 09.00 to 17.00 from Monday to Friday. It offers a range of services for parents, carers and children, including baby massage, baby yoga and drop-in activities, where children and parents and carers have opportunities to play together. A community involvement worker provides outreach services, including home visits and one-to-one support for families.

The centre is situated in one of the 70% most disadvantaged communities in the country. Approximately 16% of children under five live in workless households. A similar proportion of families are eligible for working tax credits. The proportion of families from minority ethnic backgrounds is below average. 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.

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

Snodland Children's Centre is steadily establishing its place in the local community and has seen a marked increase in the number of registered users since September 2010 when it moved to its current permanent location. Parents and carers value its friendly and welcoming atmosphere and the opportunities it provides for them to engage in activities with their children and to meet others. Since its initial registration, the centre's development has been slowed by difficulties in finding suitable premises. Its current accommodation places constraints on what it is able to offer. For example, there is no outside area where children can play and there are limitations on the range of activities that can be offered in the clinic room for health, safety and organisational reasons. Nevertheless, the centre manager has a strong vision for developing services and is proactive in securing the use of additional venues.

Rigorous safeguarding procedures ensure the safety of adults and children at all times. The centre is effective in helping parents and carers to ensure the safety of their family at home and provides good support for individuals in times of crisis. Its services are becoming increasingly popular and well attended, especially the drop-in play and activity sessions for parents, carers and children. Although these provide good opportunities for children to learn through play, they are not always planned carefully enough to build on children's previous experiences. Currently the centre does not provide enough opportunities for adult users to improve their own education, to undertake training for further qualifications or to prepare for returning to work. The community involvement worker provides valuable support for individual users and families through home visits, signposting them to other services and helping them to access guidance, for example when applying for benefits. She is instrumental in extending the centre's outreach and is constantly seeking ways to involve more families.

The centre is not yet able to measure its impact on children's learning and development, particularly in relation to their progress in the Early Years Foundation Stage, although it has already started to gather data to inform the process. Staff are refining the way they assess the needs of different groups within the community and are taking steps to tailor activities more closely to meet users' needs, for example through the Parents' Forum and an annual questionnaire. Positive steps are taken to ensure users have equality of opportunity to access services and the range of activities offered. For example, crèche facilities are provided for parents and carers attending courses. Staff are aware that some hard-to-reach groups in the community are not benefiting sufficiently from what the centre offers and are seeking ways to address this.

The advisory board is still evolving and developing its role. It has an appropriate overview of the centre and contributes satisfactorily to its strategic development, but it is not sufficiently involved in evaluating the centre's impact on outcomes for its users. Centre users are not yet represented on the board. The manager and staff have a sound understanding of what the centre does well and where improvements

are needed. They are working hard to improve areas of weakness and to address gaps in provision. Although the centre is becoming more focused in evaluating its work, the procedures are not yet as rigorous as they should be. This is largely because the use of data to demonstrate the impact that the centre has on the outcomes for users is at an early stage of development. While the centre's action plan has clear and appropriate objectives, some of which are linked to national indicators and local priorities, it does not contain measurable targets by which those who hold it to account can judge its success. Nevertheless, the increasingly effective leadership of the centre manager, strong teamwork among staff and the improvements made over the last year demonstrate that the centre has a satisfactory capacity to sustain improvement and build upon the solid foundations that it has laid.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Strengthen the governance of the centre by:
 - ensuring the advisory board provides good levels of challenge through rigorous evaluation of the centre's impact on the outcomes for children and their families
 - ensuring centre users are represented on the board
 - involving more parents and carers in the Snodland Parents' Forum and developing their confidence and skills in contributing to the centre's strategic direction.

- Improve the way the centre evaluates its own effectiveness by:
 - including ambitious, specific and measurable targets in the action plan against which to judge progress
 - ensuring that these targets form the basis of performance targets for staff
 - sharpening evaluations of each session and course so that they focus on children's and adults' learning and development and using these to modify and personalise the planning for the next session
 - making increasingly effective use of the local authority's data and that collected by the centre to measure the impact on outcomes for users, both in the short and longer term.

- Improve the provision for adult users by:
 - providing more opportunities for adults to undertake education and training and to gain further qualifications
 - working more closely with adult education agencies and Jobcentre Plus to provide easily accessible information, support and guidance for adults on training and employment opportunities.

How good are outcomes for users?

3

The centre has limited statistical evidence to demonstrate the impact of its services on the outcomes for users. Individual case studies and staff's and users' evaluations of different activities illustrate how those who attend are benefiting from the activities on offer and the support and guidance they receive. While attendance at activities is increasing, the centre is aware that its impact in some parts of the town is minimal due to some families' reluctance to engage with services. The community involvement worker is persistent in attempting to engage these hard-to-reach groups but has had limited success to date.

The centre is particularly successful in working with parents and carers to improve their emotional health and well-being and that of their children. The very popular and well-received baby massage sessions help parents to feel more in tune with their baby, as well as helping babies to sleep more soundly and suffer less from colic and constipation. The provision to improve users' physical health has some good features but is not so well developed. The recently introduced 'A Hop, Skip and a Jump' session, aimed at reducing the rising obesity rates in the area, engages children in a good variety of physical activities. Some groups offer healthy snacks and promote the benefits of healthy eating. Although the centre works well in partnership with health visitors, it has little involvement with antenatal services and is currently seeking ways to improve this. Provision for teenage pregnant mothers has, until now, been made at another centre, which has required organising taxi transport. The centre is about to start its own group and has already identified six additional young mothers who will attend.

The centre is particularly good at ensuring children's welfare and safety. Home visits, promotional materials and free home safety packs help adults to have a keener awareness of safety considerations. Events such as 'Road Safety Week' help both children and adults to have a better awareness of how to keep themselves free from harm. Eighteen parents and carers attended a paediatric first-aid course which greatly increased their confidence in dealing with potential emergencies. The centre works closely with other agencies to improve the safeguarding of children through the use of the Common Assessment Framework. The centre manager attends 'team around the child' meetings, while the community involvement worker takes part in social services case conferences. Both are proactive in taking action to ensure the safety of vulnerable children and families, including women at risk of domestic violence.

Users' and staff's evaluations reveal a common theme of enjoyment across all activities. Drop-in sessions give children and parents and carers opportunities to socialise. These help children to learn to share, take turns, cooperate and learn from others. In a 'Stay and Play' session, children made collages from pictures of fruit and vegetables and played happily with jigsaws and shape sorters. Baby signing classes help babies to communicate their needs and give parents a greater understanding of how babies learn. In sensory play sessions, babies explore their senses through lights, music and textures. The centre has rightly identified the need to liaise more

closely with schools to identify ways to help raise children’s attainment in the Early Years Foundation Stage, especially through improving their basic literacy and numeracy skills.

Users who attended a cookery course found it very beneficial. As one commented, ‘I now feel more confident to try new recipes at home and know more about healthy eating.’ There are not enough opportunities for adults to improve their basic skills and educational qualifications. This is hindering the ability of some users to improve their job prospects and future economic stability.

Parents and carers contribute to the development of services through their evaluations of the activities they attend and some volunteer to help run services, such as supporting new mothers with breastfeeding. Good relationships between staff and users help to create a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. Some users contribute to the development of the centre through the parents’ forum which meets regularly. The centre’s action plan identifies the need to involve more parents and carers in the forum in order to increase centre users’ influence on the development of services.

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	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	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

In the early stages of the centre’s development, staff planned activities that they believed were needed. As the centre has become more established, they have taken increasing account of feedback from parents and carers when reviewing the provision and planning new services. The centre is proactive in seeking out families to ascertain their needs. For example, the community involvement worker meets parents and carers at the school gates and visits pre-schools to build relationships. Effective partnerships with health visitors ensure that staff are made aware of all new births each month. The centre then makes contact with each family through a welcome letter and the offer of a free ‘goody bag’ if they register. This initiative is helping to make more families aware of what is on offer. The E-start database,

though newly implemented, is contributing to more effective targeting of services, though staff are well aware that some groups are under-represented and are seeking ways to overcome the barriers to involvement.

There is a good range of drop-in activities for parents and carers and their babies and young children. These help to improve parenting skills and users' understanding of how children learn and develop. For example, in messy play sessions children play with dough, paint and soil as well as listening to stories and joining in with action rhymes. Although sessions are carefully planned, children's learning is not assessed and recorded rigorously enough to ensure their specific needs are met or to build on previous learning in the next session.

Parents and carers are given a variety of information about employment and benefits and there is a job opportunity display board. However, the centre has not yet been successful in creating more productive links with Jobcentre Plus to facilitate parents' and carers' access to future employment. It has identified the need to establish a drop-in for parents and carers to undertake return-to-work interviews. Staff are also seeking to provide regular courses for parents and carers in literacy and numeracy through links with adult education although such opportunities are currently limited. A few parents and carers have been supported into employment, for example through the centre's volunteering programme. One mother commented, 'Staff have been so kind and have helped me to find employment' while another said, 'I do feel more courses should be available'.

The centre is developing better partnerships with other agencies, such as Homestart and social services, to identify needs in the wider community. Staff know where they need to target their efforts to attract and involve particular groups in the community. Effective signposting enables users to benefit from a wider range of services than the centre is able to offer in its own premises. Childminders appreciate the weekly sessions where they can bring the children they care for to the centre to share ideas with each other and take advantage of the centre's resources. The community involvement worker offers home visits and family support, tailored to individual needs. For example, a family from Eastern Europe, new to the area, was highly appreciative of the personalised support they received with learning English, filling in forms and obtaining financial support. Activities in the summer holidays, trips to places of interest and involvement in a wide variety of community events, such as fetes and the Snodland Carnival, are successfully raising the centre's profile and attracting more families.

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
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How effective are the leadership and management?

3

The centre manager has worked effectively with the local authority in overcoming many barriers to the centre's development since its original designation. She inspires confidence and enthusiasm among the small staff team who all share her vision for the development of services in Snodland. Staff work together well to extend the scope of the centre's work and improve the quality and range of services. The efficient allocation of resources is given high priority and ensures satisfactory value for money within the current financial constraints and restrictions on recruiting permanent staff. The centre has developed strong partnerships with some agencies, such as health visitors, Homestart and the National Childminders' Association, and is seeking ways to strengthen those with others, including antenatal services and Jobcentre Plus.

The advisory board is clear about its roles and responsibilities and has appropriate plans to implement more rigorous approaches to evaluating the centre's effectiveness. Day-to-day management is good and there are suitable arrangements for professional supervision. These too are evolving to ensure they are kept separate from performance management and target-setting processes, as the two have overlapped until recently. At present, although staff's performance is reviewed regularly and targets set, these are not linked closely enough to the priorities in the centre's action plan.

The manager has introduced appropriate systems for evaluating the centre's effectiveness. These include staff's and users' evaluations of each session, an annual parent questionnaire and a portfolio of case studies. The case studies are particularly effective as they cover a wide range of examples that demonstrate the centre's impact on individual families with a variety of needs and from different backgrounds. Staff's evaluations of sessions for parents, carers and children focus more on enjoyment than achievement and on provision rather than the outcomes for those attending. For example, there is very little evaluation of children's learning to enable staff to identify individual children's needs and plan to meet these more effectively in subsequent sessions.

The local authority provides useful statistics about the reach area, though this is a fairly recent initiative. The analysis of this data provides a suitable starting point for gauging where further improvement is required. The centre's action plan identifies appropriate priorities for improvement but the process of setting suitably ambitious targets for the centre to achieve is at an early stage of development.

The centre has a clear focus on equality and diversity and actively promotes the inclusion of all children and their families, including those with disabilities. There is clear evidence of improvement in areas where the centre has targeted its actions. The centre recognises that there is further scope to raise awareness of cultural

diversity in its predominantly White British community. The team is also aware that the centre needs to have a greater impact on improving children’s basic literacy and numeracy skills to reduce the achievement gap between the least able and the rest.

Rigorous recruitment and vetting procedures ensure that staff, including those from partner agencies, are suitable to work with children. Thorough safeguarding procedures are implemented consistently by staff and partner agencies. All staff are trained in child protection procedures and concerns relating to children’s welfare or possible abuse are quickly followed up through the centre’s effective partnership with social services.

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	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	3
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

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Snodland Children's Centre on 10 and 11 May 2011. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

During the inspection we visited a number of activities, looked at the centre's plans and documents and talked with staff, the local authority and some of you.

The centre does some things particularly well. For example, it takes great care to ensure your safety and that of your children both in the centre and at other venues where activities take place. Staff make you feel very welcome and you know there is always someone to talk to. You told us that you appreciate how friendly and approachable the staff are and how they have helped you when you were experiencing particular difficulties or hardships. You told us that you really enjoy the opportunities to socialise at the drop-ins and that your children enjoy playing with others and learning through play. We can see from your evaluations how much you enjoy the baby massage and baby signing sessions.

The centre manager has put clear plans in place to develop its services further now that it is in permanent premises. The outreach worker is constantly looking for ways to involve more people in the wider community who do not currently use the centre's services. She also offers you good personal support and guidance, for example on how to keep your homes safe, how to apply for benefits and how to support your children's learning. We have asked the centre to provide more courses for you to help you work towards qualifications and gaining employment. We know that some of you have also asked for this.

The centre gives you some good ideas about how to keep yourselves and your children healthy. Some of you thoroughly enjoyed the cookery course, for example, and said this helped you learn more about healthy eating. The centre has not yet managed to establish links with antenatal services but works closely with health visitors to try and meet your needs more effectively. It has recently introduced the 'A Hop, Skip and a Jump' sessions, as some of you requested more opportunities for your children to undertake physical activity. This is a good initiative to help reduce the rising obesity rates in the area.

Some of you are members of the Parents' Forum and help the centre to improve its services by giving feedback and making suggestions. However, centre users in general are not yet involved well enough in making plans for the future, for example by being a member of the advisory board. The centre is encouraging more of you to become involved in the forum and we would like to encourage you to do this.

The centre is taking steps to improve the range of services it offers and has sound systems in place to evaluate how effective it is. We have asked staff to be more rigorous in assessing the impact of what they do on outcomes for you and your children and to link this more closely to targets for improvement in the centre's

action plan. We have also asked the advisory board to sharpen its own procedures for making sure the centre is as effective as it can be in meeting your needs.

We would like to thank those of you who spared the time to speak to us and share your thoughts with us. 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.