

Inspection report for The Art Room Children's Centre

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| Local authority | Milton Keynes |
| Inspection number | 375463 |
| Inspection dates | 15-16 June 2011 |
| Reporting inspector | Alison Storey HMI |

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| Centre governance | The Children's Society on behalf of Milton Keynes Local Authority |
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| Date of previous inspection | N/A |
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| Linked school if applicable | Drayton Park School |
| Linked early years and childcare, if applicable | N/A |

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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 had discussions with the centre's staff, representatives from the local authority and The Children's Society, members of the advisory board and representatives from some of the centre's partners. They met informally with parents and users of the services. Inspectors 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, and its development plans and data about the people who use the centre.

Information about the centre

The Art Room opened in 2004 and was designated as a Sure Start Children's Centre in November 2005. It is situated on the Drayton Park School site and provides a range of services designed to support families and young children in the Water Eaton area and the Lakes Estate, including family support and outreach, health services, links to Jobcentre Plus and a childminder network. More recently, it has also taken on responsibility for supporting families on a new housing development at Newton Leys. It offers daily activities for children and parents to attend together but does not directly provide or commission early education and childcare registered by Ofsted. It works closely with The Wind in the Willows Day Nursery, which is a short walk away, and all four primary schools serving the estate offer nursery education. Many children start nursery with skills below those expected for their age.

The Children's Society manages the centre on behalf of the local authority and makes a contribution to its funding. At the time of the inspection, The Children's Society's contract to run the centre had been extended to the end of September 2011, pending a local authority tendering process to provide services as part of its review of children's centres. An advisory board represents the views of users and service partners. On a day-to-day basis, the centre is managed by the head of centre, known as the Programme Manager, who is employed by The Children's Society. She has been in post for just over a year.

The centre serves an area of high social deprivation. It is situated in one of the 30% most deprived wards in the country. The number of lone parents is high and over 40% of children aged from birth to four years in the area live in workless households. The proportion of adults claiming benefits is high and the proportion with formal qualifications low. The percentage of families from minority ethnic groups is in line with that found nationally. The main groups are those of Black heritage (10%) and Bangladeshi (10%).

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

Parents are unanimous in their appreciation of the services and activities provided by The Art Room Children’s Centre and the positive difference they make to their lives and that of their children. Staff have a good understanding of the particular difficulties and challenges families in the area face and the centre has effective systems for assessing the individual needs of children and families. A carefully thought-out programme of universal and targeted support meets the needs of the centre’s users well. As a result, activities are well attended and outcomes are good. There are significant strengths in the way that parents develop their well-being, confidence and parenting skills, further their own learning, and the impact of support for families at times of crisis. Outcomes relating to children and families’ health are improving, but are not yet good in some aspects.

There is an inclusive and cohesive ethos in the centre. Participants reflect the ethnic and cultural mix of the wider community, and relationships are harmonious and respectful. The safety of children, parents and staff, both in the centre and out in the wider community, has high priority. The centre’s policies and procedures for safeguarding children are rigorous and subject to annual scrutiny by both the local authority and The Children’s Society. Parents feel well supported in the centre, and comfortable to share their problems and concerns with staff, knowing that they will

be dealt with sensitively.

The commitment of all staff and partners to do the best they can for the children and families in the community, and good teamwork, underpin the success of the centre. Significant improvements have been achieved in the last year through the experience, determination and tenacity of the new Programme Manager, external challenge and support from the local authority and The Children's Society, and the restructuring of the advisory board. There is good capacity to continue this drive for improvement with a clear rationale and purpose to all aspects of the centre's work and a focus on targets and outcomes in its forward plans. The data the local authority now provides are useful tools for evaluating the impact of the centre's work. However, because some data are not yet fully developed and the centre is still familiarising itself with the information it provides, they are not yet utilised as well as they could be. Furthermore, because some key information is not shared by other agencies, the centre finds it difficult to plan and evaluate some aspects of its work.

Partnership working is good in many respects, ensuring that support is targeted appropriately for families. However, following the decision to withdraw the delivery of health services at the centre last year, it has taken time to agree different ways of working, some of which are not yet fully embedded and too recent to have had any demonstrable impact. Partnerships with providers of early education and childcare in the area are improving. The centre supports the local nursery in developing its provision and is working with schools to provide support for individual children and their families who are experiencing difficulties. Plans are in place to offer support for childminders' own development as well as providing access to activities. A learning sub-group of the advisory board has recently been established as a forum to discuss raising attainment at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage in the area and tracking children to determine the long-term impact of the centre's provision.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- The local authority should ensure that the centre has all the data and information that it needs, and the centre should develop its use to target and evaluate its work more effectively.
- Embed and build on new ways of working with health to further improve outcomes.
- In partnership with the local authority, strengthen efforts to reach out and work with other providers of early education and childcare.

How good are outcomes for users?

2

Children and adults alike enjoy their time at the centre. There is a palpable sense of children's enjoyment and interest in sessions as they join in activities, and parents talk of their child's enthusiasm to come to the centre. Children make good progress in sessions and over time, as demonstrated by improvements in their well-being and engagement in activities.

Parents' learning is actively encouraged. A good range of courses, well matched to adults' needs, and crèche facilities for virtually every session, encourage good attendance. Tutors develop a good rapport with parents in sessions, successfully getting them fully involved in sessions and creating positive attitudes to learning. As a result, parents develop important life skills such as first aid or the confidence to discuss sex and relationships issues with their older children. Pass rates on courses such as those to improve literacy or mathematical skills are good and a foundation for further learning, volunteer work or employment. Parents are actively encouraged to have a voice within the centre and ensure their views are taken into account. Staff evaluate activities and support with parents to determine the impact it has had on them and their child. There is an open invitation to make an 'expression of interest' to request a new activity or course, and regular parents' forum meetings are held to encourage input into future plans.

Children are safe and secure indoors and outside at the centre, as exemplified by their growing confidence and willingness to leave their parents' side to take part in activities and the good relationships they form with staff. They behave well and are developing important skills, such as sharing or taking turns and making choices about what they do. Individual parents and carers have been supported effectively to cope with difficult periods in their lives, improving their self-confidence and ability to deal with the situations they find themselves in. A combination of support, close work with other agencies and careful monitoring improves outcomes for the most vulnerable children.

Children benefit from opportunities to expend energy, and develop physical skills in the popular soft play room and to get lots of fresh air and exercise playing in the recently redesigned garden. Healthy snacks encourage them to try fruit and vegetables and to learn about healthy living from an early age. Parents engage well in activities such as cooking which promote healthy living, the number of new mothers breastfeeding has significantly improved in recent years, and a number of programmes boost adults' emotional well-being and ability to cope with life. For some, simply the opportunity to get out and mix with others stops them feeling lonely or isolated. They feel they can share what they are going through and that other parents will understand. However, there is still work to do to improve some health outcomes further, such as immunisation rates, a reduction in the proportion of children who are obese at age five, oral health, and the proportion of adults smoking.

These are the grades for the outcomes for users

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| 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, 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 | 2 |

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| their personal and social development | |
| 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 | 2 |

How good is the provision?

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| 2 |
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The programme of activities, services and support the centre provides is tailored closely to the specific needs of the area and its users. There is a clearly stated rationale for each activity, session or course and staff regularly evaluate the sessions both as a team and with parents to ensure that the programme continues to match their needs.

The sessions children attend with their parents have a strong focus on promoting children's personal, social and emotional development and their communication and language skills because analysis of Early Years Foundation Stage Profile results for the reach area indicates that attainment is low in these areas. The sessions adhere closely to the principles of the Early Years Foundation Stage, and learning is led by children's interests. Staff are good role models in the sessions, showing parents how to interact with their child and helping them develop their understanding of how they can support children's learning. As one parent said, 'It's good to get ideas about what to play at home.'

In addition to a programme of activities across the week for children and parents, there is a good range of universal and targeted activities, provided both directly by the centre and other services, and on- and off-site. No opportunity is lost to support users or encourage them to use the centre's facilities. For example, lone parents on benefits are invited to interviews with the Jobcentre Plus Adviser at the centre to raise their awareness of other services open to them. Dental checks are held at the centre at the end of the school day, or immediately after other activities to increase take-up, and a family support worker attends the baby clinic at the local health centre to make links with parents. Staff recognise that crèche facilities are crucial if parents are to attend courses and will sometimes barter their own skills as tutors in exchange for funding for crèche workers. For those parents who move onto courses outside the centre, or into employment, information on childcare options and entitlement to benefits is available from a variety of sources.

The Art Room Children's Centre receives referrals for targeted support for children and their families from a variety of sources, including health workers, social services and schools. Families can also self-refer. The family support workers complete initial assessments, working with parents and carers to identify the support and services that they need, and to put a personalised package into place. This may include attendance at one or more of the sessions for children and parents, enrolling on adult learning sessions, one-to-one support or referral to other services. All cases,

including those of children and families assessed under the Common Assessment Framework, identify appropriate actions and desired outcomes, and are kept under regular review. Parents feel extremely well supported at these difficult times, as illustrated by one who told inspectors, 'They saved my life.'

The centre also provides some services that are targeted to provide support for particular groups. For example, classes for those who do not speak English as an additional language and a monthly sensory session on a Saturday for children with special educational needs and their families.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

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| 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?

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| 2 |
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Members of the advisory board represent the various partners working to improve outcomes for families in the area. Each brings with them a different area of experience or expertise, but the same commitment to making the best possible use of limited resources to bring about improvements in life chances for residents on the estate. There is a clear and shared sense of priorities which has been formalised through the recent establishment of sub-groups to focus on issues pertinent to the local area such as health, domestic violence and children's learning.

Staff at all levels are highly committed to their work and the success of the centre, with a clear sense of purpose about providing the best possible opportunities for children and their families. Accountability is clear through well-embedded systems of supervision and performance management, and complemented by appropriate training and professional development.

Partnerships with other agencies are generally strong and effective, and help the centre to assess and meet the needs of its users effectively. However, some partnerships are at different points in their development and are yet to be fully embedded, such as the re-established links with health, and more recent work with schools and childcare providers in the area.

The centre's systems for reviewing and evaluating the impact of its work and action planning are effective as far as they go. Regular evaluations of activities, data such as the number of adults successfully passing courses, and the qualitative impact of

targeted support mean that senior leaders know what they do well, what works and what needs to improve. Data provided by the local authority help them to set this in the context of outcomes for children and families at a local and national level. However, because data are relatively new, and because some, for example, the take-up of funded nursery places, is not yet completely reliable, information is not yet used as well as it could be to analyse the short- and long-term impact of the centre's work. Nonetheless, appropriate detailed plans are in place, targets are set, and progress made against them is regularly reviewed.

Staff, providers of services, parents and users are all clear about their role in safeguarding children and all staff have received appropriate training. Systems for making referrals are very clear and procedures for vetting adults are secure. Vulnerable children are monitored carefully, including any who have child protection plans, and their welfare is secured. However, the centre is not routinely made aware by the relevant agencies of children in the reach area who do not attend, but are subject to child protection plans or have special educational needs. This means that the centre cannot target them to offer support. Through established links with other agencies, the centre signposts adults in need of support to deal with issues with their own safety, such as domestic violence, to relevant organisations.

These are the grades for leadership and management

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| 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 | 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 | 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 Art Room Children's Centre on 15 and 16 June 2011. We judged the centre as good overall.

During the inspection, we held meetings with many of the centre's staff and some of the other people who come to the centre to run sessions or to help you. We were also pleased to be able to speak to some of you to find out what you think of the centre and the services it provides. I would like to say a special 'thank you' to those of you who came in specially to meet us. We took your views into account when we made our judgements.

You told us how pleased you are with the services and activities the centre provides. We judge that the centre provides a good range of activities. Some, such as the very popular Tumble Time in the soft play room, are open to everyone, and others are for specific groups, for example courses to improve your English. None of you could think of any activities that were missing.

Some of you told us that the centre makes a big difference to your lives. We judge that the centre has good systems for finding out what your particular needs and those of your children are. The family support workers are good at working with parents and carers to decide the right kind of help and support for individual families. The centre's staff generally work well with partners from other services to make sure the help from different agencies is joined up and meets your needs. This is not always easy, and we have said that the centre needs to continue to work hard at its links with health and providers of early education and childcare to make sure that, together, they are fully meeting your needs.

You told us that you and your children feel safe and secure and well-cared for in the centre. We agree with you. The centre's systems and support for ensuring the safety of children and families in the centre and out in the community are good, as is the support for families at times of crisis, which helps them until they can get back on their feet.

You are confident your views are listened to and acted upon. We agree that the centre takes your views seriously and offers you different ways to share your opinions about the activities you attend and any suggestions for improvement. This

is an important way of evaluating how successful the centre is but we asked them to make sure that they also make better use of the data that are available about things, like how many of you have breastfed your babies or got jobs as a result of the centre's services, to get a full picture. It is also important that the local authority make sure that they have got all the information and data they need.

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