

Inspection report for Hand in Hand Children's Centre

Local authority	Medway
Inspection number	366437
Inspection dates	15–16 June 2011
Reporting inspector	Hilary Macdonald HMI

Centre governance	Twydall Infant School Governing Body
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Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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Linked school if applicable	Twydall Infant School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Twydall Infant School 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.

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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 manager, senior managers, senior representatives from the local authority, parents, health representatives, front line staff, Reach Out to Work advisers and a number of other children's centre partners. They observed the centre's work, and looked at a comprehensive range of relevant documentation, including those relating to the centre's governance arrangements, self-evaluation, improvement planning, evaluations, data and tracking information, and a range of policies and procedures including those relating to safeguarding.

Inspection judgements

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

Information about the centre

Hand in Hand Children's Centre is a phase two centre, located on the site of Twydall Infant School. It received its designation on 29 October 2007. The centre provides a core offer of family support, health services, childminder support, adult learning and links with Jobcentre Plus. A number of additional services and activities are provided in response to need. The reach area encompasses three reach schools and three childcare establishments. There are 18 registered childminders including five associated childminders within the reach footprint. Most children enter early education with knowledge and skills that are below expectations for their age.

Governance of the centre is provided by Twydall Infant School's governing body. There is also a children's centre advisory board that works in conjunction with the governing body, providing information and advice regarding current practice, evaluative information and suggestions for future planning. This group includes representatives from partner agencies and parents.

The centre serves a diverse community. In much of the area, the community experiences high levels of social and economic disadvantage. Levels of unemployment are high, as is the number of families in receipt of benefits, and many of the existing jobs are low paid. Approximately half of all families in the area have low levels of educational skills or training. Many families live in social housing. In contrast to this, the reach area also includes a proportion of affluent families in professional employment who live in private housing. The majority of families are of White British heritage. A range of heritages are represented among the families from minority ethnic groups living within the reach area.

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

Hand in Hand Children's Centre provides good services for young children and their families. It provides outstanding levels of care, guidance and support that are carefully tailored to families' needs, helping them to address the difficulties and challenges they face. In times of crisis, families receive instant help. As a result, the lives and aspirations of the adults are enhanced and outcomes for children are improving. The centre delivers a warm and reassuring welcome to families and professionals alike and this contributes to the continued engagement of all parties. The centre clearly lives up to its stated core values including: 'To focus relentlessly on the quality of well-being and education for all'.

Centre staff are deeply committed. They are acutely aware of their own and others' roles, and are adaptable and flexible in responding to the specific requirements of families. Provision is based on good assessment of needs, coupled with respectful and supportive relationships. Comments from parents such as 'This centre really has supported me, I'd never have got this far without them. They couldn't have done anything more.' are typical.

The centre knows itself well. Effective management systems and structures exist enabling staff to identify how and why their work and that of many partners is important and successful. Although improving, local authority data systems have not been fully effective in providing information to support evaluation and improvement planning. In particular, a lack of comparative data has meant that Hand in Hand Children's Centre has been unable to compare its own progress and achievements against others. Despite this, the centre has rigorously collected and analysed its own data, enabling constant self-review. Meticulous monitoring ensures that no family slips through the net. Individual family files and records are well managed, and the centre and its partners continually adapt to meet the changing needs of users. Successful and aspirational, the centre is able to set precise, appropriate measurable priorities towards which they collectively focus their work and accurately record progress.

The centre increasingly acts as a hub for community activity, with the number of events and the number of families using the centre having increased significantly in the last year. Despite this overall increase, the number of males engaged with the centre, other than related to antenatal and postnatal care and information, remains limited. Outreach activities have commenced at one of the reach schools, which is increasing contact with local families and further improving outcomes. Parents are supportive and encourage each other to take part in the variety of activities, raising self-esteem and promoting well-being. Some centre users have become enthusiastic volunteers and those who want to embark on adult training are very well supported by the Reach Out to Work Advisers. A number of courses are made available including basic skills in literacy and numeracy. Parents are keen to embark on the next stages of learning, including gaining level 2 qualifications and increasing their skills in information communication technology. Health-related care, advice and courses are particularly well received. Following on from the highly successful

paediatric first aid course, parents are eager to attend more child health- related learning opportunities. However, opportunities to do this are limited.

Safeguarding is given the utmost priority, with exemplary policies and procedures in place to ensure the safety and protection of both families and staff. All staff are confident in their understanding of child protection policies and procedures, and are adept at identifying vital signs, referring quickly and appropriately when necessary. Parents and carers are unanimous in saying that they feel safe when at Hand in Hand Children's Centre and they are confident to leave their babies and children in the care of centre staff or childminders employed by the centre. Children and parents with special educational needs and/or disabilities are well supported to ensure they can participate in centre activities. Family support workers provide outreach services to the most vulnerable families.

Outcomes are good. Parents and carers are deeply supportive of the children's centre. They are involved in evaluations and have a parent forum where they contribute to evaluation and discuss future plans. One parent is a member of the Advisory Board. Despite this, parents are not yet exerting significant challenge or holding the children's centre to account.

The range of opportunities for babies and young children to take part in activities that promote their learning and development is good and the planned activity programme is being further expanded. Particularly impressive are the range of activities (targeted at babies, pre-school children and those already in school) that promote communication and language skills, as well as opportunities for parents and other partners to take professional advice at a regular speech and language therapy clinic. Attainment at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage has shown an increase in language and communication skills.

As a result of detailed evaluation and analysis of the impact of each activity and service on users, the Hand in Hand Children's Centre manager and senior staff possess an accurate understanding of the progress the centre is making towards achieving their own challenging targets. This knowledge, coupled with the significant increase in range of activities and in the number of families engaged, demonstrates the centre has a good capacity to sustain improvement. Good value for money is assured.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Further develop the role of parents on the Parents' Forum enabling the parents to hold the centre to account and drive further improvements.
- Increase the number of fathers accessing the centre (other than for antenatal and postnatal visits), including by providing targeted activities.
- Increase the range of training courses and qualifications available to include use

of information and communication technology as well as level 2 courses in English.

- Increase number and range of opportunities for health-related advice and care, such as opportunities for parents to learn about long-term health conditions and by re-running courses such as paediatric first aid.

How good are outcomes for users?

2

The health and well-being of users in the Hand in Hand reach area is improving. The data that the centre rigorously gather, monitor and evaluate provide evidence of increased participation of vulnerable groups. The range of courses on offer, such as 'Funky Monkeys' and baby massage and groups, including the 'Cygnet', 'Caterpillar' and 'Cub' groups, help parents to support their children from birth onwards to develop as happy and healthy children. Case studies, interviews with parents and evaluations demonstrate that the children's centre has a positive impact on family health, including through the promotion of healthy eating developed through the very popular cookery course. Additional and more frequent opportunities for parents to learn about a range of health conditions, as well as first aid, would be well received and would enhance user knowledge of child and family health. Although obesity rates in Medway are similar to those found nationally, most recent data show a slight increase. Support for adults' emotional health and well-being is evidenced through the provision of on-site counselling services and through user feedback. Parents' comments include 'My relationship between me and my son is better, my confidence is bigger, better', and 'This place is invaluable.....without them I don't know what I'd do.' The mental health and well-being of babies and children are promoted through services such as baby massage and by referrals to and from the mother and infant mental health service.

The ability of parents and carers to ensure that their children grow up in a safe environment is well developed because of the high profile that the centre workers place on safety. Parents appreciate the soft outdoor surface for their young children to play on, and, as a result of their own requests, the large outdoor canopy that provides shelter from sun and rain. The centre has a wealth of knowledge about safety in the home. Advice, including a range of leaflets, is provided both in the centre and on home visits.

Users speak confidently about feeling safe in the centre. Risk assessments are routinely carried out. All support, including for those with a child protection plan, is extremely well coordinated. The Common Assessment Framework is used well by all parties, additional needs are identified, and coordinated service provision is delivered. As a result, the needs of children and families are met, parents report increasing confidence in managing their family situations and the need for higher-level interventions is reduced.

Individual children who have attended the children's centre and now attend Twydall Infant School have been tracked and Early Years Foundation Stage data demonstrate

impact on all areas of learning. This is particularly notable for boys, who made greater progress during their Reception Year than many of their peers who had not attended the children’s centre. Impact is also demonstrated in the increasing communication and language skills and emotional well-being of some children as they start school. The progress of children at one of the other reach schools is now similarly being tracked. The ‘Narrowing the Gap’ programme is achieving success in increasing outcomes for children identified as ‘vulnerable’. The programme allows centre staff, school staff within the Early Years Foundation Stage, partners and families to work together.

Parents made overwhelmingly positive comments about ‘Bookstart’, the ‘Reading Involvement Project’, and the Children’s Centre library, which is very well used. Celebrations and reward schemes encourage all parents and children to enjoy books and to view reading as a part of daily life. Parents also commented on improved relationships with their children and improved bedtime routines as a result of the introduction of regular reading together.

Children’s behaviour observed around the centre and at the ‘Caterpillar Group’ was lively and enthusiastic, revealing their enjoyment for learning. Many parents are also becoming confident adult learners. Opportunities to volunteer and the parent forum provide a first step for some parents to engage in the life and work of the centre. Involvement with the local ‘Medway Voice’ and ‘Cementit’ programmes has provided a number of users with wider training and experience, resulting in good preparation for work. As a result of the quality of support and advice, including interview preparation, some parents have gained paid employment or further work experience. A significantly increasing number of adults are embracing the the learning courses available. However, the range is limited and does not provide enough opportunities for developing information and communication technology skills or scope for learning at the higher levels.

The extent to which children, including those from vulnerable groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles	2
The extent to which children are safe and protected, and their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	1
The extent to which all users enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	2
The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships and users contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	2
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents are developing economic stability and independence including access to training and employment	2

How good is the provision?

2

A significant strength of the centre is the staff's and partners' abilities to recognise need. Skilled staff engage parents and families swiftly and sensitively, building confidence and trust. Respect between partners, joined up planning, excellent communication and individually tailored programmes result in users receiving the help they require. There are no gaps in the circle of support and protection. Common Assessment Framework (CAF) processes are used well.

Families seeking or needing help face no barriers and by working in a persistent and open manner the centre ensures that those who are hardest to reach and need support the most do receive it. Tracking data show a significant increase in contact with those who are hard to reach. However, very few fathers engage in activities beyond those associated with ante or post-natal care and opportunities targeted at fathers or male carers are limited.

Although many users first access the centre for a particular activity or course, they feel so welcomed that for many this has become a centre of their community. The quality provision is highly regarded. One parent told an inspector: 'The provision meets the needs of the community - as it should.' Further evidence from users shows that they thoroughly enjoy the learning provision directly managed by the centre. They say that it is well planned, with parents encouraged to join in with their children's learning, and they are taught how to develop and reinforce this learning at home. Parents also commented positively on the lack of adult furniture in the main activity room, commenting that this reinforces the expectation that 'you are here to do things with your child, not to sit around and chat'. Inspectors observed several sessions where participants of all ages were thoroughly enjoying their learning and improving their skills, such as in the soft playroom within the infant school. Staff are excellent models in creating a climate where everyone has fun as well as in promoting children's play and language development. Achievements are recorded and celebrated, whether this is a small step in a young child's development or an adult completing a course or gaining a qualification.

The centre has positive relationships with local childminders and the National Child Minding Association is represented on the advisory board. A good number of child minders bring the children they are caring for to the range of activities at the children's centre. This further benefits other parents who are able to observe and talk to the child minders and gain useful advice and information including, for example, in relation to the '2 year old offer'. In addition, the provision of a childminding facility allows those without strong networks of support to access counselling appointments and training. The centre effectively uses the full range of support systems within the locality and its increasingly close ties with the local schools and health services to ensure continuity of care and learning for all. Provision to meet the needs of children and adults, including those with additional educational needs and/or disabilities, is very good, with the centre benefiting from the skill and experience of the infant school. which is an identified provision for children with a range of physical disabilities.

Care, guidance and support are outstanding. All workers know each other and the families well and are deeply committed to providing the highest levels of care. They respond sensitively to those who present with more profound challenges, and case studies and conversations with parents confirm the skill, tenacity and care of staff. All parents spoken to appreciate the quality of support received. An example of this was demonstrated when a parent said: 'They follow things up. I came in for a chat and next time I came in they'd found all these books for me.' The centre's extensive local knowledge and positive partnerships enable flexible approaches that are tailored for individuals.

Hand in Hand Children's centre is not complacent and continuously seeks ways of reaching more families. Leaflet drops throughout the reach area and referrals into the centre from the host school, outreach schools, the midwife and other partners have contributed to the very significant increase and reach and volume over the last year. While the centre recognises there is still more to do to fully engage some families and partners, the distance travelled to reach this point is testament to the quality of provision offered.

<These are the grades for the quality of provision >

The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users	2
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all users	2
The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of users and the wider community	2
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to users within the centre and the wider community	1

How effective are the leadership and management?

2

The governance structure and the roles and responsibilities of staff, the advisory board and governing body have complete clarity and are understood by all staff and partners. Systems and practices for sharing information (including with partner agencies) and for future planning, including meetings, reports and action plans, are rigorous and highly effective. Accountability is understood, and the advisory board and governing body challenge each other appropriately. The strategic leadership of the centre and its determination to secure further improvement rightly steer all its actions. Well-aligned priorities and ambitious centre targets reflect both national and local need. Services and resources are managed efficiently and are targeted effectively where they are most needed and will have greatest impact. Front-line staff and partners are enabled to work in an integrated way with clear lines of support, professional supervision and accountability. Early intervention and prevention is at the heart of the centre's work. The excellent personal relationships between the centre and professional colleagues results in the centre's ability to offer a coordinated, cohesive and swiftly delivered package of integrated services. As a

result, challenging situations are prevented from escalating into crisis. Professional development of staff is afforded high priority and arises from focused performance management arrangements. The centre manager and senior staff are rigorous in their oversight of the day-to-day work of Hand in Hand Children's Centre.

Arrangements for safeguarding children are exemplary. Policies and practices are in place and are regularly updated and are adhered to. Staff are vigilant at all times and are all aware of how to raise concerns. Information and support are available for families experiencing domestic violence. Leaders ensure that everybody working with children, at whatever level, has been appropriately checked, and those involved in recruitment have received additional training. All staff undertake regular safeguarding, particularly child protection, training.

Statutory duties regarding equalities and diversity are fully complied with and all user groups are fully represented in the cultural, religious and national celebrations that take place through the year. The majority of families from minority ethnic groups, with young children, living within the reach area are active users of the centre. Parental and user views are routinely gathered through evaluations, surveys and case studies which demonstrate that the needs and desires of the local community are met. However, many parents and users are not fully aware of the scope of their own role in shaping provision and refining services, or in the centre's accountability to them.

<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	1
The extent to which ambitious targets drive improvement, provision is integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community	2
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of users and the wider community	2
The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties	2
The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults	2
The extent to which evaluation is used to shape and improve services and activities	2
The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services the centre has been commissioned to provide	2
The extent to which the centre supports and encourages the wider community to engage with services and uses their views to develop the range of provision	2

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

None

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Hand in Hand Children's Centre on 15 and 16 June 2011. We judged the centre as good overall.

First, we would like to thank all of you for helping us with the inspection. We found your views very useful and have used them when writing this report. Above all, after consulting you, we were struck by your appreciation of the centre and the help it gives you in so many ways. The centre does everything at least well, and some things, including the quality of care, guidance and support and the quality of safeguarding arrangements, are outstanding.

The centre has grown to become viewed by many as the heart of the local community. It is relied upon by many. The very strong leadership of the centre and the enthusiastic and skilled staff provide you and your children with a range of good services that they adapt and refine in order to best meet your wishes and your needs. They do this well and your knowledge, understanding and personal development improves as a result. So does the development of your children. Staff at the centre are good at showing you how to help your children learn at home; an example of this, that many of you spoke about, is reading with your child and the centre library reward scheme.

Those of you we talked to told us how much you appreciate the centre, how much you enjoy the activities provided and how much more you have gained from your involvement – such as new friendships, the opportunities to become involved in some sort of volunteering or adult learning programme, and the chance to become involved in reviewing the centre activities and making suggestions for new courses or further improvements.

Some of you who have taken part in literacy and numeracy skills are keen to go onto the next stage of learning. Others of you talked about how it was possible to become a volunteer and the different skills you could build, that would lead to achieving an NVQ qualification. Other opportunities include work experience and support for interview preparation. These opportunities have resulted in good take-up of further learning and training and some parents are now in paid employment as a result. Reach Out to Work provides excellent on-site advice and support. You spoke very enthusiastically about the paediatric first aid course and said you would like more

courses related to children's health. We have asked Hand in Hand to extend the number and range of courses available to you in literacy, mathematics, and information and communication technology (ICT), and also in children's health matters.

You appreciate the childminding facility that is on offer when certain classes are taking place and are confident that your children are well looked after. Childminders, too, are well supported by the centre. You view your time at the centre as time to build bonds with your children, and you spoke to inspectors about the centre's expectations that you attend groups to play and learn with your child, and how you are helped to do this. Children and parents learn about positive relationships and good communication through a range of activities, including baby massage and the 'Caterpillar' and 'Cub' groups. Not only are these activities fun, they are really making a difference to your children's well-being and speech and language development. Children who have attended the children's centre are now getting off to a better start at school.

You also provide essential feedback to the centre regarding the quality of provision and how the centre could even better meet your needs. As a result, things change. For example, the outdoor canopy and the buggy park were both installed as a result of your requests. Some of you take an even stronger part in the development of the centre through your roles on the advisory board. You are fully supportive of the centre and are kept up-to-date with all decisions. However, it is now time for you to become more challenging and to question the centre leaders about decisions that are made, making sure they are the right ones for you and the community. You told us that at the moment not many fathers are actively engaged with the centre. The programme of activities being run especially for them had not been successful and was therefore stopped. We understand that more work is to be done to encourage the dads to take part and attend activities with their children. We feel this is an important improvement.

The care, guidance and support that you and your children receive are excellent. This is because all staff are sensitive and knowledgeable. They are able to work with you, considering your needs and helping you to decide how you would like to change or improve your lives. They know all about the range of services and people who could help further and therefore ensure you can access the right services and support for you.

We would like to thank those of you who spared the time to talk to us and were willing to share your personal stories of how the centre has helped you. This helped us to build an accurate picture of Hand in Hand Children's Centre. We wish you, your families and the centre all the very best for the future.

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