

Inspection report for Sunflower Children's Centre

Local authority	Essex
Inspection number	365789
Inspection dates	22–23 June 2011
Reporting inspector	Jean-Marie Blakeley

Centre governance	Harlow District Council
Centre leader	Stacy Randall
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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Linked school if applicable	N/A
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Sunflower Nursery; EY420513

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.

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 additional inspector and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with staff and the operational manager from the centre and the network manager. Inspectors also met with parents and carers, members of the advisory board and a representative from Essex local authority as well as a number of partners including some from health, education and private organisations. They also held meetings with a childminder, the chair of the locality forum, staff from the linked nursery and a representative of human resources. They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

Sunflower Children's Centre is part of a network of six children's centres across the town that is governed by Harlow District Council and commissioned by Essex County Council. The centres are independent of each other but share some operational policies and support services, such as finance. A network manager oversees all six centres with Sunflower managed by an operations manager who also manages one other centre. There is a single partnership advisory board covering all centres. The centre opened in 2007. The centre is a phase two centre and offers the full core offer. A qualified teacher is allocated to the centre, supporting the linked nursery and the centre.

The centre's catchment area lies on the south-west edge of Harlow, bordered by open countryside. The catchment area contains eight super output areas ranging in deprivation from 22.9% to 62.7%. According to information supplied by Harlow District Council, the area has some of the highest levels of employment and income in the town, but also some of the worst housing conditions. The housing is a mixture of council stock and privately-owned houses. One hundred and fifty children live in households where no one is working.

It is believed that the ethnic profile of Harlow is changing more rapidly than in Essex as a whole. Currently, the population is around 76% White British heritage and 24% from minority ethnic groups. The largest increase has been with Polish and other Eastern European families moving into the Milwards area.

The centre is based in rented accommodation in Sumner’s Leisure Centre, which also houses a nursery and a large hall, currently used for gymnastics. Close by, there is a health centre and a primary school.

Inspection judgements

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

Overall effectiveness

The effectiveness of the children’s centre in meeting the needs of and improving outcomes for users and the wider community

3

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

3

Main findings

Sunflower Children’s Centre is satisfactory overall. Some aspects of the centre’s work are good because of the enthusiasm and drive of the operations manager. Her aspiration to raise standards is resulting in improving provision for users. As a result, the number of users accessing the centre is increasing, thereby reducing isolation and helping to develop parenting skills. Working with its partners, the centre is becoming established at the heart of the local community. The strong network of childminders, onsite nursery and centre activities provide good learning and development opportunities that increase children’s enjoyment and achievement.

Outcomes for users are satisfactory. Parents, carers and children enjoy coming to the safe, friendly and welcoming centre. Users particularly enjoy the good-quality sessions provided at Sunflower and other centres across the town. The qualified teacher, Early Years Foundation Stage leader and the operations manager provide effective guidance to nursery and centre staff in order to increase enjoyment and outcomes for children. As a result, children’s progress is good, as evidenced in the Early Years Foundation Stage profile scores where the gap between the lowest achieving 20% and the rest is narrowing. Adults develop confidence and their personal development is good because of the support and advice they receive from staff and peers. Families enjoy the fun-filled activity sessions, such as ‘Fun with 2’s’ and ‘Musical Babies’ where children and adults learn and make new friends. The health authority’s lack of local outcomes data limits the centre’s ability to target

families and demonstrate its impact on health and stay-safe outcomes. The partnership with family learning offers a range of suitable learning and development opportunities across the town. However, tracking of users' achievements across centres is difficult. As a result, the centre does not have complete records of the success and progress of Sunflower users.

Staff have a good understanding of child protection procedures. They are well-trained and ensure they share any concerns with relevant agencies. Policies and procedures for safeguarding, including the recruitment and vetting of staff, are regularly updated. Parents told inspectors that they and their children feel safe at the centre. The Common Assessment Framework (CAF) is used effectively to provide multi-agency support for families.

Working closely with most of its partners, including other children's centres, Sunflower offers a range of appropriate services to the community. One parent said, 'We go to two centres. It depends what is on, but I can usually find something for us to go to.' However, limited office space and a lack of internet access means that staff travel between sites to complete administrative tasks, reducing the time they are available at the centre. The centre has been short of one member of staff since September 2010, which has limited its ability to extend services and support to users. The lack of space in the Sunflower building means that the centre cannot provide a crèche for all courses.

The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. Community cohesion is encouraged through the well-attended 'Stay and Play' session 'All around the world'. The operations manager is ambitious to continue improving the provision, building on its strengths and reaching more users through strategies such as leaflet dropping. The centre recognises that there is a lack of information from the district council to help prioritise its work with different groups of users and to further develop systems to measure the impact of its services.

The shortage of complete data and insufficient detailed needs analysis make it difficult for the centre to target its provision successfully. Although evaluation is systematic, it does not lead to a rigorous analysis of outcomes to help staff set precise, challenging and measurable targets. The strong leadership provided by operations manager is restricted by the lack of precise target setting at a strategic level. The locality forum, advisory board, local authority and Harlow District Council provide satisfactory support and some challenge to the centre. However, the roles of the district council and the advisory board are not sufficiently distinct. As the board has been unable to recruit an independent chair, a manager from Harlow District Council currently fills this role.

Satisfactory and improving outcomes including the quality of provision and leadership and management, together with a secure understanding of strengths and areas for development demonstrate a satisfactory capacity for sustained improvement.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- The local authority and district council should:
 - collate and use data more effectively at a strategic level, including that from health services, in order to set targets to help the centre improve its outcomes
 - ensure the advisory board recruits an independent chair
 - ensure there are sufficient resources to support the work of the centre.

- Improve systems to rigorously monitor and evaluate users' progress so that the centre can measure the full impact of its work.

- Prioritise the work of the centre to target and improve outcomes for the different groups of users.

How good are outcomes for users?

3

Families benefit from advice and the promotion of safety by the children's centre workers, and some families benefit from home-safety visits and free safety equipment. As a result, they have a better understanding of how to keep their families safe. However, the centre lacks local data on the impact of its work on stay-safe outcomes. Timely support for families with children identified as at risk or in need is helping to keep children safe and is supporting their progress well.

The centre is welcoming, enabling children to play and adults to develop their skills. Play and development sessions make a good contribution to children's and adult's enjoyment and achievement. Children are developing useful personal skills for the future, such as co-operation and independence, and adults gain confidence and increase their parenting skills. One parent commented, 'The centre has helped me as a parent. I have learned how to play with my baby and help his development through singing, swimming and playing with him.' Children behave well and users treat each other with respect. Some users express their views through membership of the locality forum. Although the centre does not carefully monitor its full impact on children's achievements, it is clear that those who attend the centre benefit from their involvement. Transition into school is good for those children that attend the centre.

The centre promotes healthy living well and families increase their understanding of how to stay healthy. However, the centre lacks centre-specific data on outcomes to monitor its success. The centre recognises that childhood obesity is an issue for the area and sessions such as 'Buggy Fitness' and 'Buggy Splash' help keep families

healthy. However, the centre has not fully developed ways to monitor the impact of these and other sessions.

The centre maintains links with Jobcentre Plus but staff changes and reorganisation at Jobcentre Plus limits the continuity of services provided. The centre and its partners do not record separately the engagement and achievement of Sunflower users from other users on family learning courses or their progression into training or employment.

These are the grades for the outcomes for users

The extent to which children, including those from vulnerable groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles	3
The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	3
The extent to which all users enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	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	3

How good is the provision?

3

There is effective use of the Common Assessment Framework to provide support and services to families. Effective assessment of children's needs is used to plan for their individual learning and development. Informal assessment and user feedback enables the centre to develop provision for existing adult users. However, there is little identification of the needs of families not registered with the centre.

Provision to help children to learn and develop is good. The centre promotes learning well and activities are of a good quality. There is a positive impact on those children and adults accessing learning and development opportunities. The flexible range of services provided by the centre generally meets the needs of most users who access it. Participation is increasing but there is little precise targeting of services to meet the greatest need.

Case studies show that support from the centre is making a difference to families, particularly for their learning and development thereby increasing users' enjoyment and achievement. Parents and carers told inspectors how their involvement with the centre and support from centre staff has helped them. One user said, 'Coming to the centre has really helped my two year old socialise with other children and to

share. I have made friends which has really helped me.’ Outreach workers respond to referrals from users and other agencies to provide appropriate support. The work of the children’s centre workers has been stretched because of a staff shortage since September 2010.

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	2
The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of users and the wider community	3
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to users within the centre and the wider community	3

How effective are the leadership and management?

3

The centre manager gives strong leadership to the centre but is restricted by the lack of available data and strategic-level target setting. Staff have a good understanding of their roles and responsibilities and there has been a good focus on building the capacity of staff to better support and advise parents and carers. Although governance and accountability arrangements are satisfactory, there is a lack of clarity between the roles of the district council and the advisory board. The advisory board does not have an independent chairperson.

Good community and parental representation on the locality forum means that users contribute to decision making. As a parent, the chair of the locality forum represents the views of the community effectively through her membership on the advisory board. The centre makes use of feedback from parents to develop the range of provision. However, the recent consultation exercise had a low response rate from users.

Policies and procedures to ensure the safeguarding and protection of users on the site are effectively implemented and updated. Staff have a clear understanding about their role in identifying and reporting concerns and do so promptly. As a result, users’ ability to stay safe is increasing. The centre collaborates with other key agencies to reduce the risk of harm to children. The centre has clear systems for recording information related to the vetting and recruitment of staff. The buildings are secure and reception staff are vigilant in checking visitors to the centre.

Self-evaluation is systematic and is supported by some evidence of the impact on outcomes, although there is little precise outcomes data. There are links between the centre’s ongoing evaluation of its services and priorities set out in its development plan. However, there is insufficient evidence of other services, such as

health, evaluating local outcomes. The lack of precise data on outcomes means that monitoring, evaluation and target setting lack rigour. The centre is starting to develop its systems to evaluate the longer-term impact of the provision on improving outcomes for children and adults.

Strengths of the provision are the good partnerships between the qualified teacher, the adjacent nursery and the childminder’s network which support children’s learning and aid transition between settings. A key success has been the focused approach to improving children’s communication through the ‘Every Child a Talker’ initiative. The operations manager has built good relationships with the centre’s partners. However, the overall impact of partnerships on outcomes is satisfactory because some partners are unclear of where they should target their services in line with the centre’s priorities.

The centre meets its statutory duties for equality and diversity. Action to promote greater equality has resulted in increasing the number of families from minority ethnic groups engaging with the centre. However, there is little analysis of the centre’s impact on community cohesion. Recent consultation with users has resulted in changes to opening times of the centre. This aims to give working parents increased access to services, as currently there is little provision after 4.30pm or at the weekends.

The accommodation provides a bright and welcoming environment. The centre’s effectiveness is restricted by the limited office space, lack of internet access and recent staff shortages. Provision is planned across the cluster of centres, which avoids duplication and aids the sustainability of services. The use of resources has a satisfactory impact on outcomes for users and as a result, the centre provides satisfactory value for money.

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	3

and activities	
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

None.

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance 'Complaining about inspections', which is available from our website: www.ofsted.gov.uk. If you would like us to send you a copy of the guidance, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

Summary for centre users

We inspected the Sunflower Children’s Centre on 22-23 June 2011. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

Thank you for talking with us and contributing to the inspection of your children’s centre. Those of you we spoke to told us you enjoy coming to the centre.

The centre offers good activities and sessions to all of you that use it. An increasing number of families are attending sessions at the centre. You said that centre staff and other centre users give you support and advice, which helps you look after your children. We found that staff understand child protection procedures and that they are well trained. You said that you feel your children are safe at the centre. Some of you told us how the activities you have attended at the centre have helped you improve your parenting skills.

You told us that you enjoy sessions such as ‘Fun with 2’s’ and ‘All around the World’ with your children. We found that children benefit from accessing services at the centre and make good progress from their starting points. The centre works closely with the nursery and with childminders which helps children to progress.

Your children behave well and you learn more about how to stay healthy. The centre knows that childhood obesity is a problem in the area. Some families attend 'Buggy Walking' or 'Buggy Splash', which is helping them to keep fit, and stay healthy and have fun with their children. However, the health authority does not provide enough local information to the centre on how it is improving health outcomes.

The centre listens to you and asks you what you think of the services and activities it offers. Staff change how and when they do some things because of what you say and some of you are involved in making decisions about your centre through being on the locality forum or the advisory board. We have asked the advisory board, local authority and centre staff to monitor the outcomes more closely and really challenge the centre to improve further. We have also asked the advisory board to appoint an independent chairperson.

We found that managers, staff and partners are keen to promote equality, diversity and community cohesion. The centre is fully accessible to families and children with disabilities. However, the local authority does not provide sufficient data to help the centre target its work, identify the families most in need of support and measure the impact of its work. We have asked the staff to improve this.

The centre is bright and welcoming but there is little office space to have private meetings and no internet access, which means that staff have to go to another site to do their administrative work. This, and the recent staff shortage, has put a lot of pressure on existing staff and has reduced the time they can be on hand at the centre in case you want to drop in. We have asked the centre to work with Harlow District Council to improve this.

A special thank you to those of you who took the time to come in and talk to us and for letting us join you in some of your sessions. We wish you all the best for the future.

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