

# Inspection report for Little Explorers Children's Centre

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<b>Local authority</b>	Kent
<b>Inspection number</b>	365747
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<b>Reporting inspector</b>	Kath Beck

<b>Centre governance</b>	Local authority
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<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	Not previously inspected
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<b>Linked school if applicable</b>	Not applicable
<b>Linked early years and childcare, if applicable</b>	Not 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 leader, senior leaders and managers from the local authority and those with specific lead responsibilities, such as diversity, data, and business planning across the Ashford Children's Centres group. They also met with delegates from the Local Early Years Advisory Board, representatives from the range of services offered, the headteacher of the infant school and parents and carers using the service. Inspectors observed the centre's work, including some outreach services, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

## Information about the centre

Little Explorers is a phase two children's centre located in Tenterden, Kent. It is located within the grounds of Tenterden Infant School and serves the largest rural area in Kent, 93.25 square miles. This includes many small villages with few services and poor transport links. Little Explorers was designated as a Sure Start Children's Centre in January 2010. The centre is one of eight children's centres led by the Ashford Children's Centres coordinator, who is part of the Strategic District Early Years Advisory Board. The responsibilities of this board include monitoring all Children's Centre targets. The centre is represented on these boards by staff and users and has its own Local Early Years Advisory Board. The centre provides the full core offer including childcare, family support, child and family health services and an employment and training service. Some services are provided at The Bluebells Centre and outreach at Wittisham. The area has a mix of housing types, including social housing and flats. Unemployment rates and the number of workless families on benefits are lower than the national average. The area has pockets of deprivation ranging within the 30%-80% of the most deprived areas in the country. The large majority of families come from White British backgrounds. A few families come from Turkish, Polish, French, Chinese or Traveller heritage. Children's development when they first start in the Early Years Foundation Stage is in line with the national expectations.

## 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**

**1**

## Main findings

The overall effectiveness of the centre is good. Little Explorers Children’s Centre has, through outstanding leadership and management, established itself very quickly. It is enabling parents and carers within isolated and deprived rural communities to make a real, positive difference to their children’s lives. Users, statutory partners and representatives of the wider community, including education, have been involved fully in decision-making, governance and the design of programmes from the beginning. High quality partnerships with a range of professionals, including health and education, ensure a coherent and consistent approach to resolving the difficulties that families face. Safeguarding procedures are robust in the centre, and provision is designed to enable families to protect their children from harm.

Early consultations with partners, parents and carers and the wider community have resulted in two very successful initiatives. Firstly, concerns about children’s slow physical development led to the ‘Ashford Active Learners’ programme. This involved encouraging mothers to put their child on their tummy interact with them and help them to learn to crawl. Parents and carers of toddlers were advised to encourage their children to take part in activities that develop the fine and gross motor skills required to be able to read and write when they get older. Many people, including health professionals, have been trained to implement this programme that is proving highly successful in enhancing children’s physical skills. It is now attracting national interest.

Secondly, poor transport links and lack of free parking make it difficult for families living in isolated villages to attend the centre. To overcome this and promote equal opportunities effectively, the centre provides transport and is developing outreach provision. The centre revived, successfully, a toddler group in the village of Wittersham, empowering users to run it themselves. This has also resulted in the provision of other services locally that families say are very important to them socially and emotionally. One parent said, ‘I don’t know what I would have done without this new provision to be honest. I was feeling so cut off with two children and stuck in the house all day. Now I have friends and my children are learning to

play with others.’ The centre has a very good business plan to take more of its services into the villages and empower more users to develop provision within their communities rather than travelling to the centre. The business plan reflects the challenge the centre faces in overcoming the perception that the area is affluent. Data show that there are deprivation, isolation and other issues that make a negative impact on the lives of young children and their families. The long-term strategic plan at local authority level does not include the unique characteristics of this area sufficiently enough to ensure even better value for money.

Strong leadership and management stem from the clear aim to give children a very good start in life and intervene early to ensure this is the case. Very clear communication systems among the staff and between the centre, its partners, the local authority, and those with specific responsibilities across the Ashford centres underpin this aim very successfully. These communications enable flexibility in the access to provision so that resources are used efficiently. The central collection and analysis of a wide range of data is used very effectively to drive developments and track the centre’s performance. Already it is clear that the centre is exceeding its challenging targets to increase the number of mothers who sustain breastfeeding for six months. In addition, the number of families using the centre in the past year has trebled. The centre is highly successful in engaging some hard-to-reach families. That said, the centre has identified through its robust self-evaluation that it has not yet, with its partners, identified and engaged fully with harder-to-reach families and children within the more remote areas of the reach.

The pursuit of excellence resulting from skilled leadership and management has led to the secure foundation of the centre, with a high profile and good provision and outcomes in a short period of time. Rigorous self-evaluation based on robust analysis carried out by staff at all levels, users and the advisory board gives the centre a very clear and realistic idea of what it needs to do to improve. These factors, together with the centre’s rapid progress towards achieving ambitious targets, demonstrate an outstanding capacity to improve.

## **What does the centre need to do to improve further?**

### **Recommendations for further improvement**

- In the local authority, include the unique characteristics of this rural area in the long term strategic plan to ensure greater impact on outcomes.
- In the centre, build on high quality partnerships to identify an increased number of harder-to-reach families and enable them to access the centre’s universal and targeted services within their rural communities.

## How good are outcomes for users?

2
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Users are systematically and routinely engaged in the governance and decision-making in the centre. Parent and carer representatives on the Local Early Years Advisory Board, as well as members of the wider community, play an important role in meetings and contribute effectively to the Strategic District Early Years Advisory Board. This enables users to challenge successfully the centre's view of its effectiveness and influence decisions about provision, not only within the reach, but also in other centres in Ashford. Some users have been empowered to run groups, such as a parent and toddler group in a rural community, or become volunteers offering advice on breastfeeding or legal issues. The Parent Forum, working groups on the advisory board, suggestion box, individual discussions and regular evaluation of services provide users with further opportunities to communicate their views and bring about changes to provision effectively.

Children visiting the centre and outreach provisions are very well behaved as there is much to interest them, and parents have the time to play with them. They enjoy their time in the centre and develop well a wide range of skills, especially physical skills that are important for their future lives. The feedback from professionals and schools shows that the recent emphasis on 'Ashford Active Learners' is proving successful in developing children's physical development by the time they start school. That said, the centre has not been open long enough to demonstrate the full impact it is having on improving attainment at the end of the Reception Year. Adult education classes, such as 'Story Sacks' that lead to a National Vocational Qualification, are new to the centre, but are already proving beneficial. 'Young Able Parents' are helped to develop their parenting skills as well as gain employment. Housing and employment and training advisors provide one-to-one advice. This enables users to resolve housing concerns, learn how to claim benefits and write job applications and curricula vitae, and develop interview techniques to support the economic stability of users' families.

Users say that the good opportunities provided by the centre to help them become mentally, physically and emotionally healthy have made a difference. Advice with regard to contraception and sexual health has led to a reduction in the number of teenage pregnancies in the past year. For those about to become parents, the regular ante- and post-natal clinics are valued, as they provide easy access to medical services. The 'Craft Attack' course is particularly successful in enabling mothers to overcome post-natal depression, have the confidence to make important decisions and contribute to the community. Case studies show that users of this service have enjoyed the activities and have been empowered to become volunteers, to consider training as midwives and to lead workshops to make items for the Christmas Fair. One mother explained that the course reduced her sense of isolation, allowed her to have time to do things for herself and enhanced her relationship with her child.

'Breast mates' assist new mothers to sustain breastfeeding for six months to give children a healthy start in life. 'Family club' and weaning sessions promote food

health from an early stage. A recent 'Food for Thought' course raised the awareness of parents and carers about the high levels of fat in many foods. One user included in her evaluation, 'After the course, I changed the eating habits of all my family, not just my child.' Courses such as 'The Incredible Years', 'Chill out with Dad' and 'Baby Massage' support parents and carers in developing a close bond with their children. Speech and language assistants enable parents who have concerns about their child's language development to access help quickly.

The centre's staff, outreach workers, social services and health and school partners play an important role in the reduction of harm to children. Users say they feel safe in the centre. Early intervention and effective communications between all partners are seen as key to providing families with targeted or universal support. Through local authority data systems and local knowledge, staff in the centre understand the issues of this rural reach very well. The perception of high levels of affluence masks the rising trend in domestic abuse, isolation and financial difficulties. For this reason, it is a priority for the centre to identify more families across the area to ensure they too receive the help they need. Case studies of children who are subject to a child protection plan or involved in the Common Assessment Framework process show that as a result of the support they receive through the centre and its partners, their safety is improved. More families are accessing the programmes designed to stem domestic abuse and enhance children's safety in the home.

These are the grades for the outcomes for users

<b>The extent to which children, including those from vulnerable groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which all users enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships and users contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>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</b>	<b>2</b>

## **How good is the provision?**

**2**

Leaders and managers draw on well-established local authority data, and the views of users, professionals across a range of services, the wider community and other centre leaders to assess and meet the needs of children and their families. Consequently outcomes are good. Strong partnerships between professional groups and outreach workers ensure that assessments carried out under the Common Assessment Framework are rigorous. Multi-agency team meetings also ensure that

families are directed to appropriate services that are designed to meet their specific needs and keep their children safe.

Comments from users and regular evaluations have led to changes of the times when events take place so that they are well attended. Outreach provision, such as the 'Two o'clock club', a club for parents with children under five, takes place in a village school. The start time of 2.00pm has been arranged so that young children have good opportunities to play and learn together. Their parents and carers can easily collect their older children at the end of the school day. One mother said that she really enjoyed the club as it meant her child could learn from other children and take part in activities, such as painting, that he could not do at home. 'Gazebo on the go' is a very successful programme of outdoor activities that the centre takes to isolated villages. This engages some harder-to-attract families, including Travellers, promotes community cohesion and raises the profile of the centre across the reach.

Users are pleased with the enjoyable, free and good-quality purposeful learning opportunities that develop their confidence in parenting, help their children to learn and develop well and motivate them to gain qualifications. The 'Free for two' scheme enables users to access funding for free childcare whilst they are studying. Volunteers with skills for example in supporting new mothers in breastfeeding, or in the legal system, together with links with an employment adviser and the partner children's centres, provide further opportunities for users to advance their personal and academic development. Successes include young parents who have been offered work.

The quality of care for young children is good in the crèche and in the outreach provisions, as planning takes into account the Early Years Foundation Stage. Parents and carers know they will be helped by staff in the centre in times of crisis. One mother said that the 'Craft Attack' sessions were invaluable in restoring her self-esteem and confidence. Through home visits, speech and language development or health appointments and attendance at the various activities parents and carers receive good quality information and advice to develop the well-being of their families. The centre has identified families with disabled carers or children. It is seeking to establish a network of support and engage more of them in the centre and the services it can offer. Dental services and immunisations are promoted strongly. The number of children being immunised is on the rise as a result of this work. Outreach workers support those who are most vulnerable effectively and provide a wide range of advice to make life better for them. Users are signposted to services that provide support to reduce smoking, drug abuse and alcohol consumption.

The range of services delivers the core offer and is well integrated and cohesive. Feedback shows that the centre meets the needs of those taking up the services well and participation rates are good and improving. This is due to the good quality of the activities and the transport that the centre provides to overcome difficulties in parking and travel. To ensure viability and successful impact on bringing about changes, senior leaders present courses and activities that have been researched



fully and are known to be beneficial in the longer term.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

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

## **How effective are the leadership and management?**

<b>1</b>
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Outstanding leadership and management at all levels have enabled the centre to become established, and able to demonstrate that it has made a striking difference to users' lives in a short period of time. This stems from high ambitions and expectations that are shared by all staff, members of the wider community, professionals, Local Early Years Advisory Board, Parents' Forum and strong support from the local authority. One member of the advisory board said, 'I am very pleased to be involved in such an exciting development that is helping parents, carers and children to make a better start in life.'

Strong governance allows all groups with whom the centre is in partnership to play an active role in promoting integrated provision that is responsive to local needs. This ensures that all families, regardless of their particular special need, disability or background, are included fully. The cultures of the different groups within the community are promoted in a highly positive manner. Discrimination and stereotyping are challenged vigorously.

In the centre, there are very clear links between the strategic and annual business plans and service provision. The focus is aimed at developing sustainable high-quality targeted and universal provision across the reach area that achieves best value for money. However, local authority long-term planning does not take into account sufficiently the unique challenges that this area faces to increase the impact of its provision on outcomes for families.

High morale is enabling staff to build on current successes, especially in the outreach provision. The centre is already planning and devising different strategies to make available services in rural villages so that they are easier to access. Rigorous self-evaluation procedures, together with the Parents' Forum, informal conversations and feedback from users contribute extremely well to the development of the centre. Staff carry out robust quarterly evaluations of the services they are responsible for

and are held fully accountable for their quality and outcomes. Performance management linked to the challenging targets set for the centre, day-to-day management systems and professional supervision underpin the drive for excellence.

The centre adopts recommended good practice across all aspects of its work to keep families and their children safe. All staff and volunteers have been subject to a Criminal Records Bureau check. Other professionals working in the centre provide evidence from their employer of their suitability to work with children. Staff skills in recognising possible abuse are enhanced through regular training. The centre is devising more effective ways to ensure that all families, including those for whom English is an additional language, understand the centre's responsibilities should there be concerns about the safety of a child. Multi-agency meetings support early intervention that protects children's safety. The Freedom programme is designed to support and inform women who have experienced domestic abuse and empower those subject to it to make decisions to change their lives. Thorough risk assessments keep users and staff safe in the centre and in the community.

The centre offers good value for money because its resources and services are used well and engage users from all groups within the locality. It draws well on the Ashford Centre's champions to improve aspects of provision such as safeguarding, education, data and equality and diversity. Accommodation at the centre is multi-purpose, but provision is also organised to take place in other locations within the reach to increase sustainability and reduce costs.

These are the grades for leadership and management

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

community to engage with services and uses their views to develop the range of provision	
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## Any other information used to inform the judgements made during this inspection

None

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## Summary for centre users

We inspected the Little Explorers children’s centre on 29–30 June. We judged the centre as good overall.

Thank you for your help and contribution to the inspection. It was a pleasure to meet with some of you and hear about the different ways the centre has helped you to change your lives. As you know, Little Explorers has only been open a short time, but it has made a difference already. One of you said, ‘I don’t know what I would have done without this new provision, to be honest. I was feeling so cut off with two children and stuck in the house all day. Now I have friends and my children are learning to play with others.’ Those of you who live near Wittersham are very pleased with the way the centre supports you in running and keeping the parent and toddler group open. You told us that the centre also offers advice in the village too. This saves you having to make the journey into Tenterden where there is little free parking. You are glad that the centre can also transport you to some of the courses in the town or at other centres. You told us that you would not be able to go otherwise as money is short and you would miss the courses that are helping you to be good parents and your children to learn new skills. We noticed that your young children crawl very well and that older children like to learn by being active and they gain new talents that will help them when they go to school. This is because you are being helped very effectively by those trained to implement Ashford Active Learners into their work. The course is very successful and a lot of people nationally are interested in the way it is making sure that children’s physical development is improved.

The centre has very skilled leaders who work closely with your representatives, partners from the health services, and others in the community to make sure the provision meets your needs. They listen carefully to your views so that everyone helps to make decisions about the design of programmes on offer. High quality partnerships with a range of professionals, including those working in health and education, ensure that there is a coherent and consistent approach to resolving the

difficulties that you face. All those connected with the centre are keen to keep you safe while in the centre, as well as help you to protect your children. The centre is devising effective ways to ensure that everyone also understands the centre's responsibilities should there be concerns about the safety of a child.

The strong leadership and management of your centre stem from the clear aim of everyone to give children a very good start in life and intervene early to ensure this is the case. Very clear communication systems among the staff, and between the centre, its partners, the local authority, and those with specific responsibilities across the Ashford centres, help to make sure this aim is pursued. These communications enable flexibility in enabling you to access courses in other centres so that resources are used efficiently. The central collection and analysis of a wide range of data is used very effectively to drive developments and track how well the centre is doing. Already it is clear that the centre is exceeding its challenging targets to increase the number of mothers who sustain breastfeeding for six months. In addition, the number of families using the centre in the past year has trebled. That said, the centre has identified through its robust self-evaluation that it has not yet engaged fully with more families who may be reluctant to join the centre and children who live further away.

All at Little Explorers want the centre to be the best and, as stated previously, it is proving successful in a short period of time. Rigorous self-evaluation based on robust analysis carried out by staff at all levels, users and the advisory board gives the centre a very clear idea of what it needs to do to improve. These factors, together with ambitious targets demonstrate an outstanding capacity to improve.

The centre is based in the largest rural area in Kent and it has many villages without shops or schools. The 'Gazebo on the go' outdoor sessions are very successful in attracting those of you who live in areas some way from the centre and prefer to undertake outdoor activities. A very good business plan shows that the centre plans to take more of its services into the villages and empower more users to develop provision within their remote communities. The long-term strategic plan at local authority level does not include the unique characteristics of this area to support this innovative approach and ensure even better value for money.

We have asked that staff:

- in the local authority, include the unique characteristics of this rural area in the long-term strategic plan to ensure greater impact on outcomes
- in the centre, build on high quality partnerships to identify an increased number of harder-to-reach families and enable them to access the centre's universal and targeted services within their rural communities.

The full report is available from your centre or on our website: [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk).