

Inspection report for Murston Children's Centre

Local authority	Kent County Council
Inspection number	365818
Inspection dates	23–24 June 2011
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Centre leader	Richard Bailey
Date of previous inspection	Not Applicable
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Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	South Avenue Daycare Nursery 127560

Published: August 2010



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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 additional inspector and one early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the temporary centre manager and staff, a representative from the local authority and the chair of the district advisory board. They also held meetings with partner agencies including the health services, parents and carers and other users of the centre. They observed the centre's work and looked at a range of documents, including key policies, the centre's action plan, user surveys and the centre's evaluation of its services.

Inspection judgements

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

Information about the centre

The centre was designated in March 2008 as a phase two centre, located on the site of Murston Infant School although with no direct link to the school. It is managed by the district advisory board on behalf of the local authority. Members of staff include a centre manager, community involvement worker, early years practitioner, an administrator, a receptionist and a crèche apprentice. The centre manager was absent during the period of the inspection which was overseen by a manager from a neighbouring children's centre. The centre accommodation, though compact, consists of an activity room, small meeting room, medical room, kitchen, toilets and outside play area.

The centre is situated on the edge of Sittingbourne in Swale Borough, and the reach area, which includes urban and rural elements, is divided by the A2 road. There are extremes of wealth and poverty in the area with the most deprived Lower Super Output area having a deprivation score of 2.2 and the least deprived 86.32. A new housing development of 800 properties is nearing completion within the centre's area. There are 1,163 children under five years old in the reach area with approximately 540 registered with the centre. The centre has provided services for approximately 370 registered children in the last year. The vast majority of the population is of White British heritage, with a very limited ethnic mix, although there is a small but significant Polish community in the centre's reach area and approximately 7% of the population is from a Traveller background. Childhood obesity levels are below the Kent and national averages in the reach area at 7.55%. In 2010, 240 children lived in workless households and 15.3% of eligible families benefited from the childcare element of Working Tax Credit. Children's levels on entry to the Early Years Foundation Stage are below that expected for the children's age.

The centre works in partnership with other agencies to prioritise the services it offers users, specifically in early years development, child health and parenting skills. The centre is open for 50 weeks of the year.

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

Murston Children's Centre is providing a good service. It has had a strong impact on many of the users especially in relation to early childhood development and improving parenting skills. This is due to the commitment of the centre manager and all who work there, as well as effective, integrated partnership work. The strong and skilled focus on early years development leads children to achieve positive relationships and parents to feel more confident in their ability to care for and educate their children. This has had a positive impact on the levels children attain at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage, especially in their scores for communication, language and literacy (60% reaching age-expected levels, up from 43% in 2009) and in their personal, social and emotional development (78.6% up from 63% in 2009) and in narrowing the achievement gap between the lowest achieving 20% of children and the rest. The centre has been particularly successful in involving and supporting young parents. However, it recognises that there is a need to extend this good work out to other sections of the wider community who are not yet accessing the services such as members of the Traveller community and those who find transport difficult. In addition, the level of support given to users to access training and employment is limited although there are some notable individual successes.

There is a strong emphasis on healthy lifestyles and especially on encouraging families to eat well through the work of the community chef and courses such as Let's Cook. However, the centre is aware that breastfeeding rates are low in the area and declining and has rightly made this a priority in its action plan.

The centre is highly inclusive and many users commented on how welcoming staff are with one reflecting the views of several by stating, 'It's like a family here'. This atmosphere leads users to have confidence in staff and to trust them in times of crisis. As a result the centre provides good levels of care, guidance and support and the outcomes for the well-being of children and other users have been positive. The activities are obviously enjoyed by all participants with comments such as 'Once you come, you're hooked' being common. Safeguarding procedures are good; staff are alert to any concerns and are effective in involving other agencies where necessary to safeguard children. Centre staff are fully involved in Common Assessment Framework plans and well trained in their use.

The governance and day-to-day management of the centre are good and there is a clear understanding of the centre's strengths and areas for development. The action plan has correctly prioritised, specific and measurable targets. Users are fully involved in shaping the services and feel they are listened to. One statement from a user, 'We can suggest ideas and they are acted on' reflected the views of many.

However, users' views are collected in a fairly informal way and there is not a high level of user representation on the local steering group or district advisory board.

The impact of the centre's work is positive in many areas, notably in early years development. There is a strong commitment to continue to improve with a clear recognition of strengths and weaknesses based on robust and accurate self-evaluation. This, combined with good governance and active involvement of the local authority, means that there is good capacity for sustained improvement.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Increase the percentage of those in the reach area who use the centre by making better use of the data that are now available to target hard to reach groups such as the Traveller community.
- Develop links with agencies to extend the work the centre does in relation to helping a wider number of users to return to work.
- Improve breastfeeding rates in the reach area to be closer to the national average by the end of 2012 by:
 - extending partnerships among the voluntary sector
 - training more staff to enable them to support users in sustaining breastfeeding.

How good are outcomes for users?

2

The centre focuses well on healthy eating and courses led by the community chef are run on an ongoing basis due to their popularity. There is an awareness that levels of childhood obesity, while below the national level, have increased over the last year and so there is now an even stronger emphasis on healthy lifestyles with Let's Cook sessions and more use being made of outdoor resources to encourage an active lifestyle. Users report that this emphasis has changed their children's attitudes to healthy eating. Breastfeeding rates are low in the reach and wider area of Swale, compared to national averages, and are falling (approximately 27% in 2010). The centre recognises that it needs to be proactive in this aspect by supplementing support currently available through the health professionals, with links with the voluntary sector and more staff training. The number of teenage pregnancies is 8% above Kent and national averages with 33 in the reach area in 2010. The emotional health of users has been a strong focus and the centre has been effective in improving the lives of individuals whose problems have been recognised and where targeted support has been put in place.

Adults and children feel safe in the centre not only because of the good security arrangements but also because of the warm, welcoming staff. Children behave well as parents have been guided by staff as to how to deal with behaviour issues. On a trip to a local park, parents took responsibility not only for the behaviour and safety

of their own children but also looked out for the needs of others.

Emergency hospital admissions for children from birth to four years old are high in the reach area at almost twice the Kent average (203 per 10,000 compared to 113 in Kent). This equates to 22 admissions. The centre is aware of this and so runs paediatric first-aid courses on a regular basis. In addition, the community involvement worker will make home visits to assess and advise on making the home safer. Parents report that they now feel more confident in relation to dealing with minor accidents and how to protect their children. Staff are well trained in how to participate effectively in the Common Assessment Framework process and with child protection plans, with positive outcomes for children.

Children who access the centre make good progress especially in relation to their confidence and independence. This is because the early years practitioner is skilled in imparting her knowledge to parents in an effective way. As a result, common comments from parents are 'He's made so many friends' and 'I now know how to deal with her behaviour.' Consequently, the number of children who are reaching age-expected levels at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage in the centre's reach area is improving and the gap between the lowest achieving 20% and the rest is narrowing, and is currently 32%.

Parenting skills are developed well through successful courses such as Parents as Partners in Early Learning and the centre has been especially effective in involving young parents in these programmes. There are high levels of enjoyment seen at the activities such as messy play at Toddling Turtles and parents are adept at working with their children under the guidance of well-trained staff. Parents say staff have '... an amazing ability to involve children in all activities'.

The high number of users who wanted to make a contribution to the inspection is indicative of the contribution the centre encourages. Users feel confident that their views are listened to, such as in splitting the Rock-a-Bye music group into two sessions to accommodate different age groups and setting up a baby signing course. Although there is a suggestions box, this is used infrequently as users state that staff are so approachable, '... you can just ask them'. Although only a small number of users are engaged in governance of the centre, as there is not an active parents' forum at present, those who are involved are highly valued by the centre and they make a very positive contribution and feel empowered. There are high levels of respect seen among users, which are modelled by the staff. These together with the strong links with the adjacent community project, have had a strong impact on improving community cohesion.

Children are making good progress in enhancing their skills for the future because of the strong emphasis on early years development. However, the centre has had only limited impact so far in helping adults access training and employment. This is partly due to the small size of the centre and the amount of time staff have to devote to this aspect, coupled with only limited involvement of Jobcentre Plus despite the best efforts of the centre. There have been notable individual successes such as helping users into apprenticeships and in particular, supporting young parents to continue in

education. Nevertheless, this is an area the centre recognises needs to be improved to enable more users to develop economic stability.

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	2
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	3

How good is the provision?

2

Staff know the current users of the centre well and are adept at assessing their individual needs. The parent of a child with special educational needs stated, 'I don't think she would have had a diagnosis without the centre manager.' Staff work well with partner agencies to formulate the best layers of support, instigating or participating in multi-agency meetings to deliver specific support. This has been especially beneficial where there have been concerns about a child's welfare or in times of crisis such as with housing difficulties. As a result, the well-being of adults and children has been enhanced.

Purposeful learning and development is at the heart of the centre's rationale especially in relation to Early Years development and in parenting skills. Staff plan for all six areas of learning across every activity. This has led to raised confidence levels among adults in relation to their understanding of child development including where their children have special educational needs and/or behaviour issues. Parents become involved in celebrating and supporting the achievements of not only their own children but also those of others and this has a palpable impact on their confidence levels. The centre is aware however of the need to enhance the learning of more adults so that they can progress to employment.

The range of services offered is good and meets the needs of those who use the centre well. Their views are taken into account when formulating the plans and each session is reviewed to see whether it has met the needs of the participants. The range of services is particularly beneficial to target groups such as teenage parents, lone parents and vulnerable groups. However, staff are aware that there are still pockets of the community that they are not reaching as effectively, such as the Traveller population, despite the high quality outreach work. This is because some of

the information about the make-up of the area is relatively new and staff time, in this small centre, is stretched in meeting the needs of other target groups.

The quality of care, guidance and support in the centre is high and is enhanced by the productive partnerships and good outreach work. This is particularly so in relation to children in need cases and where there are issues of domestic violence. The community involvement worker goes out regularly into the community to carry out home visits with case studies showing perseverance where there are potential causes for concern. Often these visits are undertaken with a variety of partner agencies such as health professionals, housing association representatives or the Young Parent Coordinator. A proactive approach at times of crisis means that staff have built up high levels of trust and respect from those they come into contact with. Case studies and anecdotal evidence show this work results in some significant improvements in the lives of individuals such as in improved housing more suitable to the needs of children, advice on child care and referral for nursery provision for two-year olds.

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 leadership and management?

2

Governance of the centre is effective, even though the current system of a district advisory board, fed into by the local steering group, is relatively new. The advisory board has already been effective in supporting the centre in its self-evaluation and in developing its action plan. This plan sets out priorities appropriately, with challenging, measurable targets. Robust monitoring and a close working relationship with the local authority, combined with clear lines of responsibility, mean that accountability arrangements are good. Partner agencies are well represented on the steering group and the district advisory board, and there are also close working partnerships with the other local children's centres leading to shared expertise and resources. This all has a positive impact on outcomes for users. Day-to-day management of the centre is good and enhanced by very enthusiastic staff who have high expectations of themselves and others. Users state staff see their work as '... more than just a job'.

The purpose-built centre is small, given the number in its reach area, but it is very well resourced, attractive and staff are highly trained. Consequently, it gives good

value for money as it has been particularly effective in enhancing the early development of children and in improving parenting skills, and outcomes are good overall. However, the centre is aware that it now needs to enable even more users to benefit from staff expertise and high quality resources.

The centre is inclusive and promotes equality and diversity well. It also meets the needs well of children and families with disabilities providing one-to-one support where necessary. Although the area is not multi-ethnic, the staff try to meet the needs of the few who have English as a second language, for example, providing leaflets in other languages and arranging sessions such as Little Voices to help develop English language skills. Polish dishes were included in an international tasting session. Weekend activities such as Soccer Tots and holiday play schemes also try to meet the needs and so include a wider range of users. The building is fully accessible to those with disabilities and the centre meets its statutory requirements in this regard as it does in relation to safeguarding.

All the appropriate Criminal Record Bureau checks are carried out. All staff are clear about child protection procedures and are well trained. They are quick to identify and act upon any concerns about users' safety including if there are signs of domestic or child abuse. Where necessary multi-agency meetings will be convened under the Common Assessment Framework and the resultant plans, executed through the good partnerships that are in place, have been effective in supporting the lives of users. The most effective partnerships have been with the local community project, health professionals, housing associations and the Young Parents Coordinator. Less effective have been the partnerships with agencies to support users in training and/or returning to work, despite the efforts of the centre.

Those who use the centre are very positive about how their views are listened to and used to shape the services, although this is done on a largely informal way. The annual user survey is carried out centrally, with the children's centre discouraged from conducting its own research. This means that only a very small minority of users respond and there are no means to gather the views of users who may have communication or literacy difficulties. However, the centre is adept at getting verbal and written feedback after courses or specific outings and this is overwhelmingly positive. As yet, although there is user representation on the managing bodies, it is limited, albeit effective.

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	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

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Summary for centre users

We inspected Murston Children's Centre on 23–24 June 2011. We judged your centre as good overall.

During our visit we looked at your centre's plans for development and numerous other documents. We spoke to a wide range of partner agencies working with the centre as well as staff, the chair of the district advisory board and a representative of the local authority. We also visited all of the centre activities taking place during the inspection and spoke to a substantial number of users of the centre.

Thank you for your participation in the inspection. Those of you we spoke to were very positive about all the centre staff have done for you and your children. Several spoke of how welcome you are made to feel, saying 'You never feel like an outsider' and describing the centre as '... like a family' and that you have high levels of confidence and trust in the staff. The support given to help your children learn, develop and behave well has been particularly strong. However, the centre has had limited success in helping adults back to work. This is partly due to the time constraints on staff and the lack of specialist support but it is an area we have asked the centre to improve so that more users can achieve a more stable financial situation. The centre promotes healthy eating well and many of you have benefited

from the sessions with the community chef. However, breastfeeding rates in the area are low (as they are in the wider Swale area overall) and so we have asked the centre to train more staff and to establish links with voluntary organisations so that breastfeeding numbers become more in line with national averages.

Those of you who use the centre enjoy what is on offer and the activities and services are of a high quality. As a result of this and the expertise and enthusiasm of staff, the outcomes are good, especially for children and in developing parenting skills. The centre also works well with other agencies such as midwives, health visitors, housing agencies and the local community project to help improve the lives of those in its catchment area. Young parents have been among those who have benefited most from the good levels of care, support and guidance given by a wide range of people. However, there are still large numbers of those who live in the centre's catchment area who are not benefiting from what is on offer. As a result, we have asked the centre to use the information about these groups to try to get more involved and so improve the lives of even more of you.

Those who lead and manage the centre do it well and the action plan is an effective tool to help it to improve. However, although some of you are represented on the managing bodies, it would be good to see more users actively involved. Nevertheless, you do feel very much a part of the centre. As one of many similar comments describe it, 'We can suggest ideas and they are always acted on.'

Overall, the centre has made good progress in the time it has been established and with very strong, committed staff who are well aware of the centre's strengths and areas for development, it is well placed to continue to improve.

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