

Inspection report for Midhurst Children and Family Centre

Local authority	West Sussex County Council
Inspection number	383525
Inspection dates	29–30 September 2011
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Centre leader	Lynn Grinsted
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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Linked school if applicable	Not applicable
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Not applicable

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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 manager and staff, a representative from the local authority and members of the Centre Partnership Group (CPG). They also held meetings or conducted telephone calls with partner agencies, including the health services and voluntary organisations, parents and other users of the centre.

They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation including the centre's action plan.

Information about the centre

The centre was designated in January 2008 as a phase two centre. It offers the full Core Offer of a children's centre. It is open throughout the year but closed on Wednesday and Friday afternoons. It provides outreach services on six satellite sites because of the widespread nature of the reach area, which extends to 125 square miles. The centre is managed directly by West Sussex County Council, with the Centre Partnership Group (CPG) involved in the day-to-day management. The centre manager has responsibility for the management of another local children's centre. The centre is situated in the rural community of Midhurst with its five Super Output Areas, and is in a 70% disadvantaged rural area. The centre serves an area of social housing, mainly on the Holmbush Estate. There are approximately 80 children under the age of five in the reach area living in workless households. The percentage of eligible families benefiting from the childcare element of Working Tax Credit is 10.7%. White British is the largest ethnic group, with 96% of families in this category. There is a growing number of Polish families in the area. There are approximately 770 children under the age of five in the reach area of whom 508 have been reached by the children's centre in the last 12 months. Children's levels on entry to early years education is variable because of the widespread nature of the reach area but is broadly in line with that expected for their age although their communication, language and literacy skills are relatively low.

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 families

2

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

2

Main findings

Midhurst Children and Family Centre is providing a good service. Strengths of the centre are the commitment, enthusiasm and knowledge of all the staff who make everyone feel welcome. One quote from a parent reflected the views of many, 'a wonderful, friendly service that has proved invaluable'. As a result, the numbers using the centre, especially from target groups and those who most need support, have increased well. Outcomes are generally good and improving especially in relation to early childhood development and in helping parents understand how to be effective parents. Consequently, the gap between the lowest achieving 20% and the average is narrowing and the results at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage are improving. However, although the levels of childhood obesity declined from 2010, this is an area that the centre is aware needs continuing focus, especially at the satellite sites. Safeguarding procedures are good and staff are quick to spot any signs of concern and then put in appropriate and effective support, often drawing on the wide range of strong partnerships with other agencies. Consequently families feel safe in the centre and know that staff are there to help them and their children. This has had a positive impact on the length of time children remain on child protection plans. Adults are enabled to improve their skills, especially in relation to how to help their children, through good quality training and information.

The centre is highly inclusive and involves families well in evaluating the activities and what should be offered by the centre. 'It is always accessible and there is always something to do at the centre' was a typical view expressed. Nevertheless, although families feel fully involved, there are too few from various target groups, who sit on the CPG. In addition, while the centre action plan does contain key development priorities, there are too many and the targets are not measurable or time specific enough. Also, because some of the data in relation to key performance indicators have only recently been made available by the local authority, the centre is not yet using them effectively to set challenging targets.

The impact of the work the centre has done so far is positive in many areas and the staff know their very extensive reach area well. They have identified those who most need their support and have been effective in engaging them. There is a strong commitment to continue to improve with a clear recognition of strengths and weaknesses based on accurate self-evaluation. This, combined with good governance, means that there is a good capacity for sustained improvement.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- In order to reduce the levels of childhood obesity further, extend the good work that is being done in the main centre, to all the satellite sites.
- Improve the centre's action plan so that targets are measurable, time specific and challenging by:
 - gathering and using the data that are now available to measure the centre's impact
 - focusing on fewer key priorities.

How good are outcomes for families?

2

The centre has a strong focus on how to help families improve their health and is aware that childhood obesity levels, while marginally below national averages, still need to be improved. This has led to a focus on healthy eating with families targeted to attend a Cook and Eat course and sessions such as Mini Munchkins and Mini Movers helping children to enjoy healthier lifestyles. The Saturday Family Breakfast, now run more often as result of feedback from families, has substantially increased the involvement of fathers. Strong and mutually beneficial partnerships with the health services have also had a positive impact on families' health as antenatal and baby clinics are held at the centre and breastfeeding support is readily available to new mothers. This has had a positive impact on the sustained breastfeeding rates in the reach area and immunisation rates are also good. The centre is aware that the good work done at the Midhurst site now needs to be extended to the satellite sites.

Keeping families and especially children safe is a high priority for the centre. The reach area has a lower than average rate of emergency hospital admissions caused by unintentional and deliberate injuries to children. Courses in paediatric first aid and links with the Fire Service have improved parents' understanding of how to protect their children at home. Special events, for example firework safety and sun awareness weeks, are woven into sessions such as Mini Makers so that children are also educated. A high level of trust has been built between staff and families and consequently all of those who use the centre feel safe there. Because of the good partnerships that exist, and the multi-agency exchange of information at meetings, such as the monthly Support and Information Forums, staff are fully involved in the use of the common assessment framework, and the number of children on child protection plans is low and declining.

There are very high levels of enjoyment for all of those who attend the activities at

the main centre and the satellite sites. Children particularly enjoy the songs and actions during Rhyme-time. Here the focus is very much on improving their communication, language and literacy skills, seen as a relatively weak area in the Early Years Foundation Stage. The impact of the comprehensive and clear plans for early childhood development at every session, is being seen with the improvement of the numbers reaching the levels expected for their age at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage (61.1% in 2010) and especially, in the narrowing of the achievement gap which reduced from 32.7% in 2010 to 25.4% in 2011. The centre does not deliver adult education directly, but signposts families to local colleges although it does not consistently follow up the outcomes for those who subsequently attend.

Children behave well at all the activities and a strong focus on their personal development means that they also build their confidence and relate well with others. They also have the chance to express their views in a child-friendly way through using smiley faces and being helped to write their comments. Very high levels of respect are seen among those who use the centre as a result of the role-modelling by all the centre staff. 'A strong feeling of community' was a view voiced by many. Families feel very fully involved in decision-making through the Have Your Say sessions, the results of which are fed back to the CPG and families via 'You Asked ...We Did' notices. The centre adapted to the low numbers attending Family Forum meetings by changing the name and time so that now a wide cross-section of target groups contribute regularly. This includes groups that have been identified as requiring support, such as Polish families. They are fully involved through the work of a Polish-speaking volunteer, one of several volunteers who are making a valuable contribution to the centre.

With a strong focus on early years development at all the centre's locations, children are making good progress in enhancing their skills for the future. An effective partnership with Jobcentre Plus and good links with other agencies to help families access the correct benefits and employment have had positive impact on the economic stability of many who have been identified as being most in need of intervention and support. This includes lone parents, teenage mothers and those dependent on workless benefits. However, the data to measure the centre's impact in detail have only just been made available and some are not narrowed down to the reach area.

These are the grades for the outcomes for families:

The extent to which children, including those from target groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles	3
The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	2
The extent to which all children and parents, including those from target groups, 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 parents, including those from target groups, contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	2

The extent to which children are developing skills for the future, and parents, including those from target groups, are developing economic stability and independence including access to training and employment.	2
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How good is the provision?

2

The centre staff are very knowledgeable about the reach area, despite its size, and consequently there has been a positive impact across most outcome areas. They have identified the groups that are most in need of intervention and support, notably those who live in isolated communities and the rising number of Polish families. They have also been effective in increasing the percentages of those from all other target groups who access the services, in particular fathers, lone parents and teenage parents. There are very few disabled children or parents in the reach area but the centre has contact with the majority of them. Services have been tailored to meet specific needs such as by increasing the number of satellite sites to six, changing the times of sessions and putting on courses and activities in response to need such as cooking groups. Polish families, including grandparents, are increasingly using the services thanks to the use of translated information and the Polish-speaking volunteer.

Purposeful learning and development are at the heart of the centre's work. Most of the activities and sessions are focused around developing early learning skills, improving parenting skills and increasing the numbers from target groups who use the centre. The number of rural visits and the work of the rural outreach coordinator have had a positive impact on outcomes and especially the personal development of families who may otherwise feel isolated.

The quality of the care, guidance and support provided by centre staff is good because of the caring nature of all staff and particularly because of the work of the family outreach worker. The staff pull out all the stops to support families, especially in times of crisis, drawing on the expertise and advice from agencies it has developed good partnerships with such as Homestart, health practitioners and Aiming High (to support disabled children and parents). Parents are supported well to help their children through problem times such as separation or the birth of a sibling through the very well-devised Situational Story Sacks. Families who are isolated in the rural community receive good levels of care, guidance and support as centre staff are alert to their specific problems. As a result, families report a profound impact on their lives from contact with the centre, summed up by one family saying they had benefited 'A million per cent'.

These are the grades for the quality of provision:

The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	2
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups	2
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in	2

target groups.	
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How effective are the leadership and management?

2

The centre is very well organised and runs smoothly on a day-to-day basis despite most staff, including the centre manager, working across two centres and numerous satellites. Governance arrangements are clear and although the CPG is relatively new, members are already playing an effective part in the centre's self-evaluation and they have a clear understanding of the strengths and areas for development. Partners are well represented on the CPG and understand their supporting roles well. This well-integrated work is having a positive impact on outcomes which are meeting local needs well. There is however a recognised need to ensure that more target groups are represented directly on the CPG.

Senior leaders and managers, as well as the local authority, carry out regular self-evaluation exercises and they have an accurate view of where the strengths and weaknesses are. The views of families are used well to influence the centre's development through the Have Your Say meetings, regular surveys and feedback after courses and activities. Areas such as decreasing childhood obesity levels and focusing on early years development are rightly regarded as key priorities and included in the centre's action plan. Outcomes for families, including those in target groups and most in need of support, are generally good as a result. However, the plan includes too many areas for development and too few that are measurable or time specific. This is partly due to some of the relevant data only recently being made available.

Centre resources are of a very high quality and are used effectively to meet the needs of the target groups and those most in need of support. Particularly notable is the toy library resource which is used by families, childminders and other settings. The addition of sensory toys for disabled children has added greatly to this resource. The availability of computer terminals for public use and a 'warm phone' to obtain family information have assisted a variety of target groups including lone families. The effective management and deployment of well-trained staff, often across two centres and several sites, has had a palpable impact on improving outcomes for families, especially in relation to early years development and parenting skills. 'I would still be at the starting post' was how one family reflected the views of many. As more families, especially from target groups, are using the centre, the centre provides good value for money.

The centre is fully accessible to those with disabilities and meets its statutory duties well in this regard. The cafe-style reception is welcoming to all and the way the families who use the centre mix well together reflects the ethos of 'the extremely welcoming and supportive staff'. It is effectively removing the problems that some families may have in accessing its services in the rural community by developing more satellites. Also, by assisting with transport to other centres for specific groups such as for teenage parents, it is meeting the needs of this target group.

Safeguarding policies are comprehensive and procedures meet statutory requirements and are inherent in all of the centre’s work. All appropriate Criminal Records Bureau checks are carried out and the relevant assurances given by partner agencies. Staff are clear about what to do if they have any concerns and are quick to involve other agencies with a view to protecting and supporting families. Staff attend monthly multi-agency meetings. They play an effective role in ensuring that assessments, such as under the common assessment framework, are well informed because of their high levels of knowledge of the target families. The resultant support, because of good partnership working, has been instrumental in ensuring that children’s interests are safeguarded and the risk of harm is reduced. Staff training in wider issues, such as domestic violence, also serves to safeguard families well.

Relationships with key partners are founded on a high level of mutual respect and are well established. The centre is active in evaluating these partnerships and the effect they have on outcomes for families through the use of Targeted Activity Referral Forms and the Family Star outcomes tool. Especially strong partnerships are those with the health services. The establishment of clinics in the centre premises in Midhurst has had a positive impact on the way families engage with these services and continue to benefit from the centre’s support. There is an awareness that some of these links and partnerships services now need to be extended out to the satellites to reach even more families.

Families who use the centre are unanimous in their positive attitudes to it. This is reflected verbally and through recent user surveys and regular feedback after sessions. This information is used well to shape the services on offer such as putting on parenting skills courses and adjusting the times and content of sessions. The centre has also carried out non-user surveys in the local area to gauge how best to serve the community and has recognised from this that the centre needs to improve its signage! The work of the outreach staff has been very successful in engaging more families from target groups, such as those in isolated areas, fathers and lone parents. Consequently, the outcomes for these groups are good and improving.

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	2
The effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secure improvement in outcomes	2
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	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 partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated	2

delivery of the range of services provided by the centre to meet its core purpose	
The extent to which the centre supports and encourages families in the reach area 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

Nothing applicable.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Midhurst Children and Family Centre on 29–30 September 2011. We judged the centre as good overall.

During our visit, we looked at your centre’s plans for improvement and numerous other documents. We spoke to a wide range of partner agencies working with the centre as well as staff, members of the Centre Partnership Group (CPG) and representatives from the local authority. We also visited most of the centre activities taking place during the inspection at the Midhurst and satellite locations and spoke to a substantial number of families using the centre.

Thank you for your participation in the inspection. Those of you we spoke to were very positive about what the centre does for you and especially how it has improved your children’s confidence by increasing their personal and social skills. Typical views expressed were: ‘It’s a fantastic place’ and ‘It has made an absolutely massive difference.’ The staff have been effective in increasing the numbers who use the centre by making it welcoming and accessible, for example by having drop-in Stay and Play sessions and increasing the number of satellite sites. This has been especially effective in helping those who live in more isolated communities. A growing number of fathers are also using the services as well as those from the Polish speaking community as the centre has been proactive in adapting activities and providing support. There has been a strong focus on early childhood development, not only through the sessions such as Rhyme-time and Mini Makers, but also through good parenting courses. This has led to an improvement in

outcomes for children at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage and has also meant that children are ready for school. The centre has also been effective in helping you improve your parenting skills and in understanding how to keep your children safe and this has had a positive impact on your own skills and confidence. Although there is a good focus on helping families lead healthy lives, staff realise that there is more work to be done to reduce childhood obesity levels in the area and extend the good work being done at the main site out to the satellite venues. We have asked them to focus on this as an area for development.

Centre staff work well with a wide range of partners to ensure that those who use the centre are safeguarded. This means that everyone feels safe and there is a high level of trust in the staff who are quick to spot any possible concerns and then put in appropriate support. Many of you spoke highly of the support you have received, especially from the Family and Rural Outreach Workers.

The centre listens to your views well, through the Have Your Say sessions, regular feedback and surveys. Staff use them to adapt and improve the services, for example putting on more Saturday Family Breakfasts. Although your views are fed back to the CPG, too few from different groups in the community attend these meetings. In addition, although the CPG understands the centre's strengths and areas for development, the centre action plan has too many priorities and does not always set targets that are measurable. We have asked the centre to make improvements in this aspect.

The centre runs smoothly on a day-to-day basis despite most staff covering a very wide area and also working out of another children's and family centre. Everyone is enthusiastic and committed to improve and there has already been a positive impact in many outcomes, especially in relation to children's early development and the numbers who use the services. As a result, the centre is well placed to continue to improve.

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