

Inspection report for The Squirrels Sure Start Children's Centre

Local authority	Milton Keynes
Inspection number	383820
Inspection dates	4–5 July 2012
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Centre leader	Amanda Collins
Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
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Linked school if applicable	Wood End First School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Stantonfields Pre-school Playgroup (EYR141805)

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.

Report published: July 2012



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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.

An inspection of the co-located infant school was carried out at the same time as the inspection of the centre under section 5 of the Education Act 2005. The report of this inspection is available on our website: www.ofsted.gov.uk.

This inspection was carried out by an additional inspector and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the centre coordinator, other staff, early years practitioners, health representatives, social workers, family support workers, advisory board members, local authority representatives and parents. They also observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

The centre was designated as a phase two centre in 2008, but became a mixed model in 2010 in order to meet its core purpose. The centre is based in Stantonbury, which is the 18th most deprived area in the local authority and includes 25% council and social rented housing with high levels of mobility. Over a third of families living in Stantonbury receive housing and council tax benefits. The centre is open Monday to Friday from 8.30am to 5.00pm for 48 weeks of the year. Additionally, the centre runs a monthly Saturday club known as 'Dad's Zone'.

There are 889 children living in the reach area of which 32% live in workless households. Some 19% of families across the reach take up the childcare element of Working Tax Credit. The majority of families living within the reach area are from White British, Asian or Sri Lankan backgrounds with some speaking Punjabi, Urdu or Tamil at home. Children's skills, knowledge and abilities when they enter early provision are typically below the levels expected for their age.

The day-to-day management of the centre is the responsibility of the centre coordinator and the team employed by Milton Keynes Council. The centre's work is

overseen by an advisory board comprising representative partners, local councillors and parents. The local authority is the accountable body.

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

3

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

3

Main findings

The centre’s overall effectiveness is satisfactory with good quality outreach supporting the most vulnerable families. There is a strong team ethos among staff to do their best for the community and ‘turn little acorns into sturdy oaks’. However, not enough families across all target groups, particularly lone parents, participate in centre activities. The lack of precision in action planning and target setting leaves increased engagement too much to chance.

Leadership and management are satisfactory. Leaders draw on a range of information to help inform their evaluations. However, these tend to be over generous because not enough use is made of specific data to check how services engage and improve outcomes for all target groups. Self-assessment processes usefully involve key staff, parents and partners on the advisory board in holding the centre to account for its performance but their scrutiny lacks a good level of challenge. For these reasons, the centre’s capacity for sustained improvement is satisfactory.

Provision is satisfactory overall with good quality care and support and robust safeguarding arrangements. These result in families, especially those suffering domestic abuse, being given effective guidance and timely interventions that help improve their lives. Partnerships are strong, particularly with health and social care. Effective use of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) and Team Around the Child (TAC) procedures leads to a high proportion of families in contact with the centre keeping safe, including young children subject to a child protection plan. However, despite a variety of initiatives in place to help families lead healthier lives, the level of childhood obesity is above the local average, while sustained breast feeding rates are 6% below those seen elsewhere in the local authority.

The centre's good focus on equalities and inclusive practices underpin its work to support other early years providers in closing the achievement gap for children in danger of achieving the poorest outcomes with the rest. The gap reduced by an impressive 10% last year and at 23% is much narrower than seen either locally or nationally. Parents from a range of ethnic groups feel welcomed and included in activities. A Punjabi speaking mum told inspectors, 'My child gets very excited when he sees the green gates of the centre and can't wait to enjoy Stay and Play.'

The personal development of adults is supported well through sessions that help build their confidence and positive parenting, for example as part of the Nurturing Programme. Those who want to improve their basic or employability skills are usefully signposted to local adult education courses or invited to attend the recently established job club. The centre does some individual work to help families manage their money and get out of debt. However, leaders are not following up with sufficient rigour the longer-term impact of interventions to see how well families' financial stability or economic well-being is further improved.

Parents' contribution to the daily life and development of the centre is satisfactory, for example through their feedback after activities. A small number of parents serve on the advisory board, some have become volunteers in the past but none seem keen to rekindle establishment of the parents' forum. Close attention is given to encouraging dads' involvement in the monthly Saturday activities and they identify strongly how much they 'enjoy playing football, love the arts, crafts and think the breakfast at the start is great!'

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Extend the centre's engagement with all target groups and increase their participation in activities, especially lone parents with young children.
- Sharpen self-evaluation and action planning by using data to set precise, measurable and challenging targets to support more rigorous checking of how well outcomes are improving for target groups.
- With the local authority, health services and other partners, seek to reduce obesity rates in the reach area and increase the proportion of mothers sustaining breastfeeding at six to eight weeks.
- Evaluate the academic achievement of adults who access further learning opportunities and follow up the full impact of the centre's services on their economic well-being.

How good are outcomes for families?

3

The centre's work to assist families in being healthy results in satisfactory outcomes. Health services located at the centre include ante- and post-natal clinics and a health

visitor 'drop in' which local parents can access more easily than the hospital or clinics. Effective work takes place to improve families' oral hygiene with teeth cleaning demonstrations, free toothpaste and brushes handed out to 20 families for use at home. Parents identify activities such as 'mini strikers' and 'walks in the park' as helping their children to become physically active and enjoy exercise. Courses have been organised that involve parents in cooking nutritional meals on a budget and healthy snacks are available at all sessions, which the children were observed to relish. Despite this, child obesity rates in the area are above those in many other parts of the local authority. The importance of breastfeeding in giving children a healthy start in life is promoted through the leaflets available, posters displayed and signposting to local clinics. At 50.3% the level sustaining breastfeeding is much below that seen across the authority and the centre recognises it needs to be more proactive in 'championing' this aspect of its work.

The centre places a high priority on making sure families are securely protected, especially the most vulnerable, through the good quality family-support work, including home visits. Supervised access sessions for parents with children subject to a child protection plan help families bond and benefit from the warm and friendly atmosphere of the centre and good role models of staff. Evaluations show the significant benefit some mothers' involvement in the Freedom Programme has had, particularly on increasing their understanding about how to look for the triggers that lead to abusive behaviour and how to avoid them. A positive 75% of those completing the most recent course continue to participate in centre activities. Some families have participated in the centre-organised 'keeping children safe' course and others have taken up home safety checks and loaned equipment such as stair gates. The data show far fewer emergency visits to hospital are occurring due to accidents in the home.

Children in the reach area make good progress from their starting points in developing the skills that will help them in the future. At 68% the proportion of children attaining 78+ scale points is well above both local and national averages. Children develop personally and socially from experiences such as Stay and Play sessions which are well planned to promote their social and emotional development in particular. They are well prepared for their transition to school, for example, through the 'getting ready for pre-school' session run by the centre in partnership with the co-located setting.

Case studies show that a few adults benefit from their involvement in courses, for example, English as a Second Other Language (ESOL) or literacy and numeracy skills training. Some clearly gain in confidence from well-targeted activities that build their confidence and positive parenting skills. One parent told inspectors that 'I love the activities because I get to spend quality time with my child and they enjoy being with other children.' However, less than a third are engaged in centre-led activities that result in a clear pathway to supporting both their academic achievement and their future employment. A small number of parents are directly involved in centre decision making and make a positive contribution; for example, their views help

shape services such as the provision of a speech and language specialist to work with a group of children who are experiencing communication problems. The centre has recently recruited four volunteers; they are awaiting the results of the required vetting checks before starting.

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	3
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	3

How good is the provision?

3

The quality and range of services meet the needs of families in contact with the centre satisfactorily. Over a third of families from minority ethnic backgrounds living in the reach area, a third from workless homes, all disabled children and a fifth of teenage parents access services regularly. At just under a fifth, the proportion of lone parents accessing centre services is lower.

Close working with other partners ensures information is shared and services coordinated. The children's centre staff work closely with health and social care professionals to assess and support the needs of families and refer for one-to-one support as required. This enables the development of dove-tailed services that have good impact on families' safety.

Care, guidance and support are good. Parents identify how valuable the centre's services are in helping them through times of acute crisis. The CAF and TAC work with those who are exceptionally vulnerable is both sensitive and highly effective in keeping children, including looked after children, well protected. Family support work is a strength and senior staff have built a good knowledge of the families who are most in need of support. Their interventions make a positive difference to improving families' life chances and choices. One mum who undertook the Freedom Programme commented, 'It's worth doing the course because you meet others, move forward together and make good changes.'

The centre promotes the purposeful learning, development and enjoyment of children well as reflected in their good achievement by the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage. Promotion of adults' learning and development is satisfactory rather than good because there is not enough assessment of personalised learning needs, especially concerning further education, work-related training and employability skills. Additionally, leaders are not following up closely enough what impact the access to signposted courses has on the outcomes for those who take them up and so cannot plan any follow-on work or next steps provision with accuracy.

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	3
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups	3
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups	2

How effective are the leadership and management?

3

Leadership and management at all levels are satisfactory overall and have some good features that result, for example, in helping close the gap between young children's development and age-appropriate levels and moving beyond. The warm and welcoming ethos of the centre is valued by parents from many different cultures who come together to enjoy learning and have fun with their children at sessions such as Parent and Toddler and Stay and Play. Access for parents and disabled children is good and those with special educational needs benefit from close and effective contact with the centre.

Rigorous safeguarding procedures result in good levels of safety whether during activities or through support in their home. Staff are very alert to child protection matters and regular training helps inform their good practice. Staff appointments are vetted carefully and the multi-agency approach to responding to families' needs results in timely interventions and a secure safety net of support. The centre's work to support suffers of domestic abuse is a strength.

Governance arrangements are clear and there is satisfactory quality assurance of the centre's performance though regular meetings with the local authority and during advisory body meetings. However, the lack of precise targets in the action plan curtails some accountability checks because it is difficult to track what impact services are having on the different target groups. The centre's self-evaluation is detailed but is too focused on describing the range and quality of what is being provided rather than evaluating the impact of this on improving the lives of families. Additionally, there is not enough identification in the delivery plan of precisely what

steps the centre is taking to engage with more groups and what the timescale is. It is clear in discussion with staff and advisory board members that they have this in mind as a key priority.

The centre is very small in size but makes effective use of its accommodation to deliver activities every day. It extends provision by using school accommodation in different localities from which commissioned services such as Mini-strikers are delivered. However, records show that turnout to some activities is frequently lower than expected and in discussions with parents inspectors found that different activities such as singing and music-making would be welcomed. Considering overall satisfactory outcomes and user engagement, value for money is satisfactory.

Parents' and children's personal achievements are celebrated well with a 'squirrels lunch' and through the award of certificates in recognition of their participation in courses, for example the Nurturing Programme, which helps foster good family relationships and close bonds. The words of one mum sum up the general views held: 'We have turned a massive corner due to the course, everything has changed for the best and we now live in a happy household. I have also made some amazing friends.'

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 effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secure improvement in outcomes	3
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	3
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 delivery of the range of services provided by the centre to meet its core purpose	2
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	3

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

Findings from the concurrent Wood End First School inspection in relation to attainment on entry to the Early Years Foundation Stage and partnerships were taken into consideration.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected The Squirrels Sure Start Children's Centre on 4–5 July 2012. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

We talked with some of you, your children, staff and a wide range of partners and members of the local authority linked to the centre. We looked at evaluations of the centre's work and a range of documents and very much enjoyed chatting to you during activities. Thank you for your contribution to the inspection.

It was great to see such very new babies enjoying being at the centre's Bumps and Babes session and to hear mums share their experiences. It was also interesting to listen to your views about additional services that the centre could put on, for example singing and music-making, which some of you travel to other venues to take part in. We have asked the centre coordinator to encourage more families to use the centre. It would be good if you could tell others to get in touch with her so that the centre can respond to their needs too, especially those on their own with young children.

A particular strength of the centre is the one-to-one support it provides for those of you experiencing personal problems or suffering crises. You told us that when you join in the activities at the centre the staff make everyone feel valued and included in activities. The centre and other early years providers are working effectively to help your children enjoy achieving and be well prepared for starting school. The adult courses on offer clearly help many of you to build personal confidence, feel better equipped to face challenges in your lives and grasp new opportunities. However, not enough of you are currently engaged in further learning, training or work readiness courses. The centre is not yet focusing enough on finding out about how those of you who do access training get on and what else they might provide to help you get back into work.

Centre leaders are working soundly to meet the needs of the different groups living in the area. They have managed to help nearly 50% of families with young children living in the area to engage with centre services. The provision they currently make is satisfactory and we have asked them to look more closely at how accurately they

assess the impact of the activities you experience in terms of helping you live healthier lives. For example, the level of obesity in reception-age children is higher than in other areas of Milton Keynes, and the proportion of mums who breastfeed their babies for over eight weeks, is much lower than seen elsewhere in the local authority. We have also asked leaders to sharpen up target setting so that members of the advisory board can check to see whether the centre's performance is improving strongly enough. Please continue to make your views known and if anyone wants to volunteer to become a member of the advisory body or help set up a parents' forum to help plan the centre's future – please let the centre coordinator know.

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