

Inspection report for The Saplings Sure Start Children's Centre

Local authority	Milton Keynes
Inspection number	362606
Inspection dates	17–18 July 2012
Reporting inspector	Christine Field

Centre leader	Victoria Parkes
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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Linked school if applicable	Knowles Nursery School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	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.

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.

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

The inspectors held meetings with the centre coordinator, headteacher of the co-located nursery school, early years practitioners, health professionals and adult education staff. They also held meetings with family support workers, community development workers, advisory board and governing body members, local authority representatives, volunteers, parents and grandparents. Inspectors observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation including the self-evaluation form and service delivery plan.

Information about the centre

The centre was designated as a phase two, 70% reach centre in 2006 and opened in 2008. The centre is based in the town centre of Bletchley, is open Monday to Friday from 8.30am to 4.30pm for 51 weeks of the year and meets the full core purpose. Additionally, the centre runs a monthly Saturday club for working parents and male carers, and delivers outreach services in five different locations.

There are 1,061 children living in the reach area, of which 34% live in workless households. Some 22% of families take up the childcare element of Working Tax Credit. The majority of families living within the reach area are from White British backgrounds, the next largest group are from Bangladesh with a high number speaking English as an additional language. Around a quarter of families live in social housing and a rising proportion in temporary accommodation. The skills, knowledge and abilities of children when they enter early years provision are typically below the level expected for their age.

The day-to-day management of the centre is the responsibility of the full-time centre coordinator and the team employed by Milton Keynes Council comprising a full-time family support worker, a 0.5 family support worker and administration/receptionist

support for ten hours a week. In addition, the centre buys in part-time administrative support and a 0.5 family support worker to make the local authority funded post up to full time. The centre's work is overseen by the governing body of the co-located nursery school under a service level agreement with the local authority. The centre budget was devolved to the governing body in October 2011. An advisory board, which is a subcommittee of the governing body, comprises representative partners and has the remit to both challenge and support the centre. 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 effectiveness of the centre in meeting the needs of the diverse community it serves is satisfactory and overall outcomes are satisfactory.

A range of well-coordinated centre-led activities are supporting families to know how to help their children eat nutritionally, enjoy exercising and achieve healthy weights. At just under 8%, the level of obesity is below the local and national average and reducing significantly. However, the centre is less successful in its work to increase the rate of sustained breastfeeding and has yet to establish a strategy for targeting improvement. The safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults is promoted adequately. There is compelling evidence in case studies to show that family support work is particularly effective in helping families through times of personal crisis. One mum told inspectors, 'The centre helped me through a very bad time. I am now coping much better and if things get too much I know there is always someone here to help.'

Good learning and development opportunities strongly support the good personal achievement of children and adults. The centre's enabling environment supports the learning interests, needs and differing skills of individual children well. Good partnership work involving community development workers and the Jobcentre advisers, for example, help families most in need of support, including some from minority ethnic backgrounds, to improve their financial stability and get back on their

feet. The centre promotes equalities successfully and families from different cultures state how included, valued and respected they feel when they attend activities. The centre's work to help narrow the achievement gap has high impact and children are building good skills for their future. Parents play a satisfactory role in helping shape centre services, for example through their survey responses and post-activity evaluations, but none are currently represented on the advisory board and this restricts their direct involvement in decision making.

The centre is not yet reaching the majority of families in its area, particularly teenage and lone parents. Self-evaluation processes satisfactorily ensure that leaders have a clear understanding about strengths and weaknesses. However, the centre's improvement planning lacks precision and there are not enough specific targets in place to help the advisory board gauge the success of the actions being pursued to bring better effectiveness. Leaders have high aspirations for the community the centre serves, but the lack of clarity and sharp focus in the systems and tools in place to deliver better outcomes means that the centre's capacity to sustain improvement is satisfactory rather than good.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Extend the centre's reach and increase the engagement of all target groups, specifically teenage and lone parents.
- Sharpen service delivery planning by focusing on a sensible number of priorities, setting clear measures of progress towards challenging targets and identifying precise timescales for making improvements.
- With the local authority, health services and other partners seek to improve sustained breastfeeding rates to at least meet the local authority average.
- Work actively to extend parents' involvement in the centre's decision making, including their representation on the advisory board.

How good are outcomes for families?

3

Families are helped to eat healthily and enjoy exercise due to the work the centre does, for example through cooking classes, mini-striker sessions and walks in the park. Health professionals, including the community dietician and oral hygienist, work in good partnership and this has a positive impact as reflected in the significantly-reducing child obesity levels in the area. Instances of oral decay amongst the Bangladeshi community are reported as reducing dramatically due to the centre's strong focus on good oral hygiene. The centre encourages breastfeeding and provides comfortable discrete seating areas. There is signposting to other centres where breastfeeding sessions run, but there is nothing specifically available at the centre to support breastfeeding and no strategy in place to bring a targeted increase. At 43%, the level of sustained breastfeeding is well below both national and local levels and is an issue for the centre to address.

The centre raises families' awareness about how to keep safe through experiences such as the first-aid training programme and a parenting programme to help foster parents' involvement in children's learning experiences., both of which use interpreters to widen access to those at an early stage of learning to speak English. Domestic violence is less prevalent than in other areas of the borough, but when instances are referred the staff respond quickly and ensure that families are appropriately protected and empowered to deal with their situation. The centre's well-equipped multi-sensory room provides a place of safety for families to use when life get tough. It is used positively during supervised access and helps families enjoy being together and building stronger bonds. The centre's involvement with, and use of, the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) is not a strong enough feature in its otherwise good work to safeguard families, including those with children subject to a child protection plan.

Children living in the reach area make good progress from their starting points with an above average 66.7% achieving 78+ scale points in the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile. The gap between the lowest achieving 20% and the rest is reducing rapidly and, at 19.6%, the gap is much narrower than seen locally or nationally. The centre makes a strong contribution to helping children build good skills and extend their knowledge across all of the areas they experience. Very well-planned, high-quality activities such as the singing and rhyme session engage children's sustained interest as the children choose a toy from the magic bag and sing a song tunefully about a teddy bear, fish or two 'little dicky birds'. Playing drums and marching to the beat of 'The 'Grand Old Duke of York' assist children's coordination and physical development as well as being great fun.

Well-chosen resources stimulate the children's curiosity, such as parachute games, and promote good levels of independence both during indoor and outside play. The excellent partnership with the co-located nursery and developing partnership with other pre-school settings assist children in making a confident move to their new school. The emerging work on tracking the progress of children who have attended the centre is a positive feature.

Adults learning to speak English as an additional language benefit from English language classes, with some progressing from entry level to advanced levels. Parenting skills are well supported with parents identifying that their confidence and self-belief are nurtured positively because of the centre's well-timed interventions. Weekly drop-in sessions run by the Jobcentre have resulted in a high number of families using the centre receiving advice about training and benefits. Book keeping and information technology (IT) courses are well attended and have helped some parents into employment, for example in opening a wedding planning company. The centre's successful volunteering programme helps adults build good workplace skills. It has led to one volunteer completing a degree and securing a good job. Parents say that they are confident to put forward their views and someone always listens to their suggestions, but none are currently active in more formal decision making or governance.

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	3
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	2

How good is the provision?

3

The centre is in direct contact with 44% of families in the most disadvantaged community of its reach area, including a satisfactory proportion from minority ethnic groups, families with disabled children, dads and families living in workless homes. However, its overall reach is not yet sufficient, particularly in engaging with teenage and lone parents of which there are rising numbers. A recent survey confirms that families who use the services offered by the centre are satisfied with their quality and accessibility. The evaluation of services by key partners confirms that the needs of families using the centre are taken into account to make adaptations, for example by providing translation during adult learning sessions for those at an early stage of learning to speak English.

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. Adults' learning and development are also good because the centre staff raise aspirations and ensure that provision meets personal and social needs as well as extending work-readiness skills and the prospects of employment. Personal achievement is recognised and celebrated to good effect, although more could be done to promote adults' achievements alongside children's achievements in display.

Care, guidance and support are adequate, with strengths in the outreach work undertaken with the most vulnerable families. Parents identify that family support workers understand their needs well and that interventions have a positive impact on improving family life, particularly in times of crisis. One mum told inspectors, 'The staff care enough to know when you are having a bad day and say just the right things to get you back on track.' The coordination of support is being strengthened through network meetings that the centre has initiated and which involve partners

coming together to share information more regularly.

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	2
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups	3

How effective are the leadership and management?

3

Leadership, management and governance are satisfactory overall, with some good features that result in good equality of opportunity for the young children who attend the centre and who go on to achieve well. Additionally, adults are helped to up skill and secure improved financial stability. The friendly and inclusive ethos of the centre is valued by parents. The weekly multicultural Stay and Play session promotes an appreciation and respect for the different lifestyles and beliefs within the centre's community.

Governance and accountability arrangements are clear and staff supervision is effective. Self-evaluation processes are inclusive with staff and members of the advisory board working cooperatively to identify strengths and weaknesses. They are very aware of the need to extend the centre's reach and are striving to make improvement, for example through publicising the centre in public places and in the local newspaper. However, service delivery planning lacks sharp focus and priorities get lost in too much detail. The lack of challenging targets is a missed opportunity to share leaders' aspirations and the timescale for action sets a satisfactory, rather than a good, pace to improvement. There is no doubt that leaders have the commitment and drive to move the centre forward, but because the systems and tools in place to make this happen lack precision, the centre's capacity for improvement is judged as satisfactory rather than good.

Safeguarding is well prioritised and staff training, for example regarding child protection matters, is up to date. Staff vetting checks and risk assessments comply with requirements. Cooperation amongst partners ensures that families most at risk are well protected. Families are effectively made aware of how to keep safe and the referral system that alerts the centre about cases of particular vulnerability is securely in place. Information-sharing protocols, although satisfactory, do not always ensure that the CAF process is used consistently to aid assessments.

Partnerships are strong and make a positive contribution to the effective services that mainly meet local needs, although there is room for improvement in engaging with higher numbers of families, especially teenage and lone parents. Parents enjoy

attending the centre and benefit from well-planned activities that respond well to their needs. The activities programme is reviewed regularly in response to staff evaluations and parent suggestions with changes made as appropriate, for example to the timings of sessions.

Parents told inspectors that their views are listened to by the centre and in the past a forum has enabled a more formal process for them to contribute to the centre's development. However, this disbanded last year and so far no parents have become advisory board members. The centre is an attractive place with good quality resources that families enjoy using. Given the current level of engagement, and overall satisfactory outcomes, value for money is satisfactory.

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	3
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 Knowles Nursery School inspection in 2010 were taken into consideration.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected The Saplings Sure Start Children's Centre on 17 and 18 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 governing body, advisory board and 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 super to see you and your young children enjoying activities, such as the singing and rhyme session, and to hear the shouts and screams of joy when they played parachute games. Through such experiences the centre is helping young children to build personal confidence, emotional resilience and develop good learning skills for the future. We enjoyed seeing you study on the IT course and during the book-keeping session and chatting with those of you who have benefited from the English language and basic skills courses. We have asked leaders and managers to encourage more families to use the centre and it would be good if you could tell others to get in touch so that the centre can help to meet their needs too. Please make sure that the centre knows about any good ideas you have for improving its services, and if anyone would like to become a member of the advisory board, just let the staff know.

It was reassuring to hear from so many of you about the positive difference the centre and its partners has made to keeping you healthy and safe, especially when you are going through tough times. The increasing numbers of children with healthy weights is a positive indicator that you are much more aware about a healthy diet and exercise because of your involvement in cooking sessions and walks in the park for example. Some of you have chosen to breastfeed your baby to give them a healthy start to life, but generally the numbers breastfeeding are quite low. It would be good to see those who are successful in breastfeeding support others and tell pregnant mums about the benefits, sharing any tips. We have therefore asked the centre to do more to encourage mothers to breastfeed.

You told us that when you visit the centre, the coordinator and family support staff make everyone feel welcome and included in activities. The multicultural Stay and Play session is a good example of how the centre enables families to share their cultural experiences and gain deeper insights into similarities and differences. It was lovely to hear you speak so warmly about the respect you have for one another and how this helps the wider community to live in harmony.

The centre leaders are working hard to develop activities that are exactly what the community needs and, in addition to the passion they have for the job, they have written plans to help things move forward. However, the plans are not as well focused as they could be and there are very few targets included to make goals clear or to set a brisk pace to improvement. We have asked leaders to review their

forward planning so that your centre becomes good in all respects as soon as possible.

Good luck and best wishes for the future.

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