



Department  
for Education

# **Increasing Parental and Community Involvement in Sure Start Children's Centres**

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## Summary

This paper is for anyone who would like to become more involved in running Sure Start Children's Centres, such as community groups, on behalf of a local authority. It is also for local authorities and anyone who uses or is involved in running children's centres. You might be a parent or carer, a children's centre leader or staff member or working in a local authority, voluntary and community sector organisation or school that commissions or delivers children's centres services.

The Government believes that parents have a key role to play in children's centres. We want to see how we can help parents and communities have more of a say in shaping and delivering children's centre services, and becoming much more involved in the activities of their children's centres.

We would particularly like to hear from groups of parents and community members who are interested in working with the Department for Education to develop their own approaches to community management of their local children's centre, such as co-operatives or other social enterprises.

The deadline for responses to this paper is **19 July 2012**.

### Contents:

- **Section 1** sets out the Government's commitment to helping parents and communities have more of a say in running children's centres and the support that is available for innovative arrangements such as public service mutuals;
- **Section 2** sets out why we think it is a good thing for parents and communities to be involved in running children's centres;
- **Section 3** sets out some of the existing ways in which parents and communities can get involved with their local children's centres; and some new opportunities to get involved in running their local children's centre.
- **Section 4** includes some questions for discussion and next steps; and invites expressions of interest from groups which would like some support to develop proposals to set up their own community body so that they could bid to run their local children's centre.
- **Section 5** includes some other sources of information and support.
- **Annex** contains examples of parental and community involvement in children's centres.

# 1. Government is committed to helping parents and communities have more of a say in running children's centres

The Government is committed to improving public services by putting choice and control in the hands of individuals and neighbourhoods. It set out its vision in the **Open Public Services White Paper**<sup>1</sup>.

In particular, the White Paper said:

*"In addition, we will explore extending different models of increased independence and a more diverse provider base to children's centres – including considering employee mutuals and how to achieve a greater role for voluntary and private sector providers."* (Open Public Services White Paper, Para 6.30)

The Government is pursuing this approach by supporting innovative arrangements for delivering public services in a number of ways:

The **Localism Act 2011**<sup>2</sup> has given voluntary and community groups, local authority employees and parish councils the Community Right to Challenge their local authority by expressing an interest in providing services on behalf of the authority. This can include provision of children's centres. (The Right to Challenge provisions are expected to come into effect on 27 June 2012, subject to parliamentary approval.)

The Cabinet Office has launched the **Mutuals Information Service** and **Mutuals Support Programme**<sup>3</sup> to support public sector employees who want to form mutuals to deliver public services.

The Department for Education is committed to the engagement of voluntary and community sector organisations in running children's centres. The Department has given a grant to the national charity, 4Children, to work with selected local authorities to identify and overcome potential barriers that may be faced by voluntary and community sector organisations. Their findings and good practice will be shared and discussed with the voluntary sector, local authority and children's centre leader networks. Another Department for Education grant is supporting the national charity Daycare Trust to trial forms of volunteering in foundation years settings, and to prepare materials on volunteering.

Both children's centres and the families who use them are very diverse. While

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<sup>1</sup> Open Public Services White Paper: <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/resource-library/open-public-services-white-paper>

<sup>2</sup> Localism Act 2011: <http://communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/localismplainenglishupdate>

<sup>3</sup> Mutuals Information Service: <http://mutuals.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/> and Mutual Support Programme: <http://mutuals.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/support>

increasingly services are being contracted out to voluntary, community and private sector organisations, many continue to be run by local authorities directly. A significant number of children's centres are managed on behalf of local authorities by school governing bodies or academy trusts. There is already a range of ways in which parents and communities support the governance and management of children's centres. Local authorities and children's centres are encouraged to build on and develop parental and community engagement in ways that meet local needs and aspirations. However, we believe that there is significant scope to go further and to encourage groups of parents and children's centre staff to develop community management models together such as co-operatives, mutuals or social enterprises.

It is even more important to tailor services to meet families' and communities' needs in a tough financial climate. Local authorities are making difficult decisions about how to allocate resources. In doing this they are seeking to ensure that spending on frontline services is maintained and professionals and communities are involved in determining local priorities.

## 2. Why is it a good thing for parents and communities to be involved in running children’s centres?

Children’s centres work with families to help children make good progress in their development so that they are confident and ready for school. They offer extra support to those who need it and can help parents find further help when facing difficult times. It is right that parents should have a major say in how services are being provided so that children’s centres meet local needs more effectively and support the local community as a whole. Encouraging and increasing parental and community involvement in the running of children’s centres can lead to greater innovation, flexibility and community cohesion, which can result in improved outcomes for children and their families.

What greater parental and community involvement can give:

For parents and communities	For children’s centres	For local authorities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>A voice in directly shaping services</b></li> <li>• <b>Support that best meets your needs and those of your children</b></li> <li>• <b>Opportunities to engage as equal partners with professionals</b></li> <li>• <b>Improved self-confidence, personal development and employability, which can in turn support your well being, and parenting abilities</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Clear accountability to parents and local community using your centre’s services</b></li> <li>• <b>Clarity about the difference you are making to families</b></li> <li>• <b>A stronger local community to work with and help deliver services to the most vulnerable families</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Increased locally driven innovation and creativity</b></li> <li>• <b>More responsive and cost effective services for families with young children – directly driven by and accountable to those who use them</b></li> <li>• <b>Increased local capacity for communities to take over and run services themselves</b></li> </ul>

The original Sure Start Local Programmes were developed on a principle of community involvement. The National Evaluation of Sure Start found that those Sure Start programmes that were better at “empowering” parents also demonstrated improved outcomes for parents. Ways in which they empowered parents included involving them progressively in service planning and delivery through volunteering, targeted training, employment opportunities and representation on decision-making committees and

boards. More empowerment was related to more stimulating home learning environments, which are beneficial to young children's development.

Many children's centres continue to have excellent approaches to parental and community ownership and partnership. We want to build on these approaches to find ways of enabling families and communities to have a stronger voice in the running of children's centres. Through the *Children's Centre Core Purpose* and *Supporting Families in the Foundation Years* documents, the Government has set out a clear vision for what children's centres should do. More detail about what children's centres can do to achieve the core purpose can be found at: <http://www.foundationyears.org.uk/>

This is not just about mothers and fathers – grandparents, carers and the whole community can get involved in their local centre, along with volunteers like Community Learning Champions and other local organisations used by parents and carers. We would like to see children's centres acting as genuine community hubs – for example by welcoming older people's groups to use the facility for community activities, by providing more community learning opportunities, or by supporting siblings or older children's services or activities where appropriate locally.

### 3. How can parents and community groups get more involved in their local children's centre?

There are already many ways in which parents and communities can get involved in children's centres. Some of these are summarised below. There are some examples of community groups who are already running children's centres in an annex to the document.

#### Some existing ways

**Taking part in consultation exercises:** Local authorities have a legal duty to ensure that there is consultation before any significant changes are made to children's centre provision in their area. It is important that parents and community groups are encouraged to respond to the consultation by their local authority.

**Volunteering:** Volunteering can offer valuable experience or a chance to work in a new setting prior to training or seeking paid work. It can be an opportunity for parents and carers to help with the planning and delivery of services in children's centres using their local knowledge. A volunteer in a children's centre freely gives their time or expertise to carry out agreed tasks that add to the services that the children's centre is then able to provide. This can vary from an hour or so to five days a week and there are many ways in which volunteers can get involved in helping in children's centres. Volunteers could be involved in a range of activities and carry out different roles – including helping with 'stay and play' or other centre-based groups, assisting in the management or administration of the centre, or helping with outreach and home visiting. Many children's centres already encourage parents and others to work as volunteers. Last year *4Children* carried out a survey of 181 children's centres on behalf of *Family Lives*<sup>4</sup>, which found that 87% of them were using volunteers.

Each children's centre makes its own decisions about who is recruited as a volunteer so if you are interested, then do get in touch with your centre.

**Information on Sure Start Children's Centres, including what they offer and where there are located, is available on Directgov:**

[http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/parents/preschooldevelopmentandlearning/nurseriesplaygroupsreceptionclasses/dg\\_173054](http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/parents/preschooldevelopmentandlearning/nurseriesplaygroupsreceptionclasses/dg_173054).

**Being a parent or community member on a children's centre advisory board or part of a parents' forum:** Local authorities also have a legal duty to make sure all of children's centres have an advisory board; and that the membership of advisory boards

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<sup>4</sup> Volunteering in Children's Centres, Family Lives and 4Children:  
[http://familylives.org.uk/docs/children's\\_centre\\_report\\_2011.pdf](http://familylives.org.uk/docs/children's_centre_report_2011.pdf)



includes parents and prospective parents from the local authority area. Advisory boards provide a way for people to offer views and suggestions on the running of children's centres but they do not have a decision-making role. Many children's centres also run parents' forums which enable larger numbers of parents to make their views known about the services on offer and the way the centre is run.

Revised Statutory Guidance<sup>5</sup>, which is currently out for consultation, sets out what local authorities should do when setting up or overseeing the management of children's centres. This guidance sets out who should be involved as members of an advisory board, and also describes an advisory board's role and responsibilities. The children's centre leader may chair an advisory body or delegate that responsibility to a parent or community member. Local authorities or providers should offer appropriate support and training to help parents or community members carry out their role effectively. The closing date for responses to our consultation on the Statutory Guidance is 1 June.

**Being a parent or community member of a school governing body or academy trust:** Where school governing bodies or academy trusts run children's centres on behalf of the local authority – getting involved in the governing body or trust can also involve taking on responsibilities for the running of the children's centre.

**Being a parent or community member of a management committee:**

Where children's centres are commissioned out to voluntary and community sector organisations, there may be opportunities for parents and communities to get involved in the children's centre management arrangements that those organisations put in place. We would encourage voluntary and community sector organisations to involve parents on their management committees and many already do so.

## New opportunities

**The Community Right to Challenge** provisions in the Localism Act 2011 will enable voluntary and community bodies, local authority employees that wish to form a public service mutual<sup>6</sup> to deliver the service, and parish councils to express an interest in running a local authority service. The Community Right to Challenge provisions are expected to come into effect on 27 June 2012, subject to parliamentary approval. Draft Statutory Guidance on the Community Right to Challenge is available at: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/righttochallengeatguidance>. When the provisions come into force, local authorities will have to consider expressions of interest and, where they accept them, run a procurement exercise for the service. The Right will hand the initiative to groups with good ideas about how services can be run differently or better, ensure their ideas get a fair hearing, and that they get the time they need to prepare effective bids for services.

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<sup>5</sup> Sure Start Children's Centre Statutory Guidance:

<http://www.education.gov.uk/consultations/index.cfm?action=consultationDetails&consultationId=1808&external=no&menu=1>

<sup>6</sup> A public service mutual is an organisation which has left the public sector (also known as ('spinning out')) but continues to deliver public services. Further information is available from the Mutuels Information Service at <http://mutuals.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/what>.

The Right will provide parents and communities with new opportunities to:

- form their own community body and express an interest in running a local children's centre or a particular children's centre service themselves;
- link up with local community organisations who are interested in broadening their activities and expressing an interest in running a children's centre or a particular children's centre service; or
- link up with local authority employees who are interested in forming a public service mutual and express an interest in running a children's centre or a particular children's centre service.

Further details of how the Right to Challenge will work in practice are available at:

<http://communityrights.communities.gov.uk/what-are-community-rights/community-right-to-challenge/>

**Public Service Mutuals:** Where local authorities are considering with their children's centre employees options for them to set up and transfer into a public service mutual in line with their 'Right to Provide', there may be opportunities for parents and local authority employees to link up and run the children's centre together.

**Sponsorship:** Parents and communities may even want to propose that their local authority opens a new centre – where they are able to find a sponsor to pay for the centre's running costs. Any proposals along these lines would need to be directed to the relevant local authority, which would need to take into account other services already in place when considering such a proposal.

## 4. Questions for Discussion and Next Steps

We would like to hear your thoughts on the following questions:

- i. How can it be made easier for parents and communities to get more involved in running centres?
- ii. Are there particular types of support with getting more involved that parents and communities would find helpful?
- iii. Where there are differences of view between parents and professionals who are providing services, how should these be resolved?
- iv. How can we ensure that the needs of the most vulnerable families are reflected in any new arrangements?
- v. Are there any particularly good examples of parental and community involvement that you would like to share with us?

Please email your responses to these questions to the Department for Education at [parentpaper.SSCC@education.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:parentpaper.SSCC@education.gsi.gov.uk) by **19 July 2012**.

We would particularly like to hear from groups of parents and community members who are interested in setting up their own community body to bid to run their local children's centre. We would also be interested in hearing from children's centre staff and parents who propose to set up a public service mutual and bid to run a children's centre together. We would welcome expressions of interest from all areas of the country, including rural areas.

Please let us know if you would be interested in working with us to develop your own management model, e.g. a co-operative, social enterprise or mutual. We will only be able to work with a small number of groups so we will need to carry out a selection process.

If you are interested, please complete the attached expression of interest form and return it to [parentpaper.SSCC@education.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:parentpaper.SSCC@education.gsi.gov.uk) by **19 July 2012**.

The prospective community bodies will need to work closely with their local authority and we would also be interested to hear from any local authorities who would like to be involved in developing new parent-led management models. The relevant local authority will have the final say as to whether a community group's bid to run a children's centre or children's centre services is successful.

### *Support with developing some proposals*

We want to support a small number of groups of parents and community members who are interested in setting up their own community body so that they can bid to run their local children's centre. This support is aimed at developing parent-led models, but we would also consider proposals from children's centre staff who are interested in developing a model that involves parents and staff forming a community body to run a children's centre together. There will be no direct funding for projects. The support will take the form of advice and guidance to help groups develop and test their proposals.

## 5. Other sources of information

### **DirectGov – Information and Sure Start Children’s Centres:**

Information on Sure Start Children's Centres, including what they offer and where there are located, is available on Directgov:

[http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/parents/preschooldevelopmentandlearning/nurseriesplaygroupsreceptionclasses/dg\\_173054](http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/parents/preschooldevelopmentandlearning/nurseriesplaygroupsreceptionclasses/dg_173054).

### **Mutuals Information Service:**

The Mutuals Information Service is for anyone interested in setting up a public service mutual. <http://mutuals.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/>

### **Mutuals Support Programme:**

The Mutuals Support Programme provides professional support to new and developing mutuals so that they can overcome barriers to growth. The Mutuals Information Service refers eligible organisations for this support.

<http://mutuals.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/support>

### **Draft Statutory Guidance on the Community Right to Challenge:**

This guidance provides further explanation of the legislative framework for the community right to challenge.

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/righttochallengestatguidance>

### **Community Rights:**

A Community Rights website has been launched to give people more information about the new powers and opportunities available to them. It includes details of how the community right to challenge will work in practice and the support and advice that is available to community groups.

<http://communityrights.communities.gov.uk/>

### **Direct Gov - Getting involved in your community:**

Contains useful information e.g. on removing barriers to getting involved in your community; starting a charity; volunteering; and sources of funding for voluntary and community groups.

<http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/HomeAndCommunity/Gettinginvolvedinyourcommunity/index.htm>

### **Volunteering England:**

<http://www.volunteering.org.uk/>

# Annex - Examples of parental and community involvement in children's centres

## Volunteering

Most children's centres encourage volunteering. The diversity of volunteering roles has implications for the kind of support they may need.

A 4Children survey of 181 children's centres in 2011<sup>7</sup> set out different ways in which volunteers are contributing to their work and found that:

- Volunteers can be engaged in all sorts of roles, for example -
  - Providing refreshments at a parent and toddler group each week
  - More involved work such as becoming a parent mentor, doing home visits or contributing to the running of the centre
- Typically centres have three or more volunteers engaged in different activities.
- Activities volunteers are most likely to be engaged in are:
  - Stay and play groups for children;
  - Participating in children's centre governance; and
  - Helping to run specialist groups such as breastfeeding support and healthy cooking.
- Most children's centres with volunteers have a volunteer management policy - covering safeguarding, measures to protect confidentiality, support and supervision and other day to day management issues

*Park Children's Centre* in Skelmersdale, Lancashire is currently looking for more volunteers. The Council's website contains information about the children's centre, which includes advice on how to find out more about volunteering in the centre. Among other things, this explains that volunteers will receive a full induction, free training and CRB check – these are all essential to ensure that volunteers are supported appropriately in their role and to ensure that risks of inappropriate practice are minimised. The website also says that volunteering at the centre is a pathway to gaining a business administration or childcare qualification. In this way, volunteering contributes to the work that the children's centre is doing to help parents and others back into paid work.

[www.lancashire.gov.uk/corporate/web/?siteid=5678&pageid=32095&e=e](http://www.lancashire.gov.uk/corporate/web/?siteid=5678&pageid=32095&e=e)

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<sup>7</sup> [www.familylives.org.uk/docs/children's\\_centre\\_report\\_2011.pdf](http://www.familylives.org.uk/docs/children's_centre_report_2011.pdf)

Some further examples of how volunteering opportunities in children's centres are being promoted can be found through the links below:

Durham

<http://www.surestartcountydurham.org/sthelenaukland/Pages/VolunteeringOpportunities.aspx>

Gateshead

<http://www.gateshead.gov.uk/DocumentLibrary/Education/EarlyYears/Volunteer-CC-leaf1.pdf>

<http://www.gateshead.gov.uk/People%20and%20Living/Volunteering/children.aspx>

Brighton and Hove

[http://www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/downloads/bhcc/children/Parents\\_Volunteering\\_information.pdf](http://www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/downloads/bhcc/children/Parents_Volunteering_information.pdf)

London Borough of Barking and Dagenham

<http://www.lbbd.gov.uk/ChildrenAndYoungPeople/ChildrensCentres/Pages/volunteeringopportunities.aspx> “

*Westgate Children's Centre* in Morecombe, Lancashire helped to develop an *Empowering Parents Group* for younger parents, which has been running since 2008. Many parents joining the group are unemployed and often do not have many qualifications or much work experience.

The parents' learning journey starts with a 10 week confidence building course while their children attend the centre crèche. For most, this is the first time they have undertaken any learning since leaving school. On this course they cover a range of personal development topics such as communication skills, equality and diversity and safeguarding children. They are also made aware of volunteering opportunities at the children's centre such as becoming a parent representative or volunteering to help with various services and activities.

Westgate has promoted this approach to other children's centres, and it is now available at 8 other centres in Lancashire. Other centres paid Westgate Children's Centre a nominal fee to help cover the costs of a Westgate outreach worker providing training to their own staff to enable them to set up groups and the confidence building course themselves.

So far, a total of 137 learners have started the course at Westgate and taken part in groups since this approach started, of whom 131 have completed it. 55 of those who have taken part are single parents, and 25 are fathers. 71 participants are living in the most deprived areas around the children's centre. 70 parents went on to complete NVQ level 2 qualifications and 15 achieved an NVQ at level 3 or above. 47 participants have entered employment.

## Parent forums and Advisory Boards

- Many children's centres seek parents' views on services and local needs, in informal ways. Some organise regular meetings of parent forums, where parents and children's centre staff can discuss services and other matters of local interest together.
- Each children's centre must be covered by an Advisory Board which helps those responsible for running centres to be clear about parents' views and with driving improvement in children's centre performance. Membership of Advisory Boards must include representation of parents and those expecting babies.
- The Department for Education is consulting on draft revised children's centre statutory guidance until 1 June 2012. This highlights the importance of considering carefully how best to involve disadvantaged or vulnerable groups in Advisory Board arrangements.
- The draft guidance suggests that if certain groups are unwilling or unable to represent their own views by joining an Advisory Board, the children's centre should ensure these families have other opportunities to make their views heard, for example, through using outreach support networks or parent forums.

## School governing bodies that run children's centres

- A significant number of children's centres are located on school sites.
- Around a quarter of children's centres are managed on behalf of local authorities by school governing bodies or Academy Trusts. Other children's centres on school sites are managed direct by the local authority, and some are managed by voluntary sector organisations.
- School governing bodies that have children's centres on their sites – but do not already have a service level agreement in place to run them – might wish to explore the possibility of doing so with their local authority.
- Anyone aged 18 or over can apply to become a school governor. No specialist qualifications are needed. Parents and members of the community can either apply directly to school, through the local authority or by filling in the application on the School Governor' One Stop Shop website. Further details are available on Directgov at [http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/parents/schoolslearninganddevelopment/schoollife/dg\\_10038366](http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/parents/schoolslearninganddevelopment/schoollife/dg_10038366).



## Voluntary and community sector organisations running children's centres

- Just under a fifth of children's centres are run by voluntary and community sector organisations, on behalf of local authorities. Some are national children's charities – others are local organisations that were quite often set up to help regenerate their area as part of wider community development. Running a children's centre forms part of their wider local work.
- There is potential for parents to form constituted voluntary organisations that then either take on the running of some local services (including children's centres) or bid to do so during local tendering exercises. Parents can also try to interest existing local organisations to bid to run children's centres.

### ***Examples of local voluntary and community sector projects that are running children's centres on local authorities' behalf***

Some of the examples below show how voluntary organisations already running children's centres often run other services in the same area, or are involved in wider community projects.

*Haslingden Community Link* was established in 1998. Their aim is to provide a facility 'for the common good' where people of all ages within the community can benefit from a wide range of services. In addition to running a children's centre, Haslingden provides a café, numerous courses and self help groups for people of all ages and hires out community rooms for special events.

[http://www.hcl.org.uk/childrens\\_centre.htm](http://www.hcl.org.uk/childrens_centre.htm)

*Manor and Castle Development Trust* manages the Woodthorpe and Wybourn children's centres on behalf of Sheffield City Council. Set up in 1997 to work with local people to regenerate the neighbourhoods in the Manor and Castle area, the Trust was built on three local neighbourhood forums. These forums provide community representation to the board and are a mechanism for participation and consultation. Services offered by the Trust include: training, help to find work, health, support for families and activities for children and young people.

<http://www.manorandcastle.org.uk/>

*Quaggy Development Trust*, a registered charity and company limited by guarantee, was established in 2004 as a successor to the Orchard Community Project. From its home at the Quaggy Children's Centre in the Royal Borough of Greenwich, the Trust delivers services to the local community and runs two social enterprises - Quaggy Nursery and Quaggy at Margaret Bondfield Nursery. It is governed by a Board of Trustees who are

responsible for setting the strategic direction of the Trust and ensuring that the charitable objectives of the organisation are fulfilled to the benefit of the people on the Coldbath & Orchard and Heathside & Lethbridge Estates and surrounding areas.

<http://quaggydevelopmenttrust.org/default.aspx>

**Mutual enterprises** are usually owned by and run for the benefit of their members. Some local voluntary groups that run children's centres enable staff to become members, along with local parents.

One example is Millmead Children's centre in Margate in Kent... *Millmead Children's Centre Partnership Ltd* (MCCPL) has been commissioned by the local authority to deliver the centre, and was enshrined as a Community Mutual, a not for profit organisation, to ensure community participation and involvement was at the heart of decision making. Local parents and families along with staff working at the centre can become members of the Community Mutual for a nominal fee and this enables them to become more involved in deciding how the centre is run and the services it provides. Giving parents and families ownership and involving them at every level of the organisation is one of the centre's keys to success. Currently MCCPL has circa 30 volunteers contributing in a variety of ways from assisting in the running of groups, to being involved in service reviews, planning, food production at the allotments, being representatives on interview panels and the action group where their views are heard. Members can stand for election to one of the 7 places on the Management Board, where their vote counts in providing challenge to the direction and management of the centre. The model has proved both effective and efficient and the enormous contribution of parent volunteers is acknowledged in the delivery of Millmead Children's Centre.

[http://www.kenttrustweb.org.uk/chc/chc\\_millmead\\_home.cfm](http://www.kenttrustweb.org.uk/chc/chc_millmead_home.cfm)



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