



**University of the
West of England**

Brentry & Henbury Children's Centre

Final Report of the Knowledge Cafe Evaluation Event

2nd February 2011

By Billie Oliver, Barry Percy-Smith and Pat Young



1. Background

Opened in May 2004, **The Brentry & Henbury Children's Centre** is an independent Children's Centre managed by a Charitable Trust. The aim is to provide a range of high quality, child centred care, education and family support services to children under 5 and their families living in the local community. They host a range of community groups alongside the family support.

The Children's Centre works with 195 children from 650 families within its 'reach' area each year. The Children's Centre staff team comprises 63 colleagues including Early Years Practitioners, Teachers, Social Workers, Health Visitors, Nursery Assistants and Community Support project workers, many of whom are recruited from the local community.

The University of the West of England was invited to facilitate a Knowledge Cafe event with the aim of exploring the views and experiences of key stakeholders and to see if there are any ways of improving the activities and services the centre provides.

The secondary aim of the project was to build a foundation for a more extensive evaluation of the Children's Centre's work



2. The Knowledge Cafe

The Children's Centre is proud of its holistic approach to care and of its inclusive approach to responding to the needs of the local community. The Knowledge Cafe methodology was therefore chosen for its participatory action inquiry approach in order to engage staff and service users alike in a process of reflective inquiry with respect to the work of the Children's Centres. A Knowledge Cafe approach involves participants in open, creative and reflective conversations as a way of exploring and responding to shared experiences and key issues. In this knowledge café, emphasis was placed on using visual participatory appraisal approaches to capture perspectives, encourage dialogue and invite reflection. This approach enables participants to surface their collective knowledge, innovate thinking, share ideas and gain a deeper understanding of the issues involved.

There were twenty-six participants at the knowledge café, comprising 19 parents/grandparents, 6 staff and 1 Trustee.

The event took place on 2nd February 2011 and lasted for two hours.



3. A picture paints 1000 words

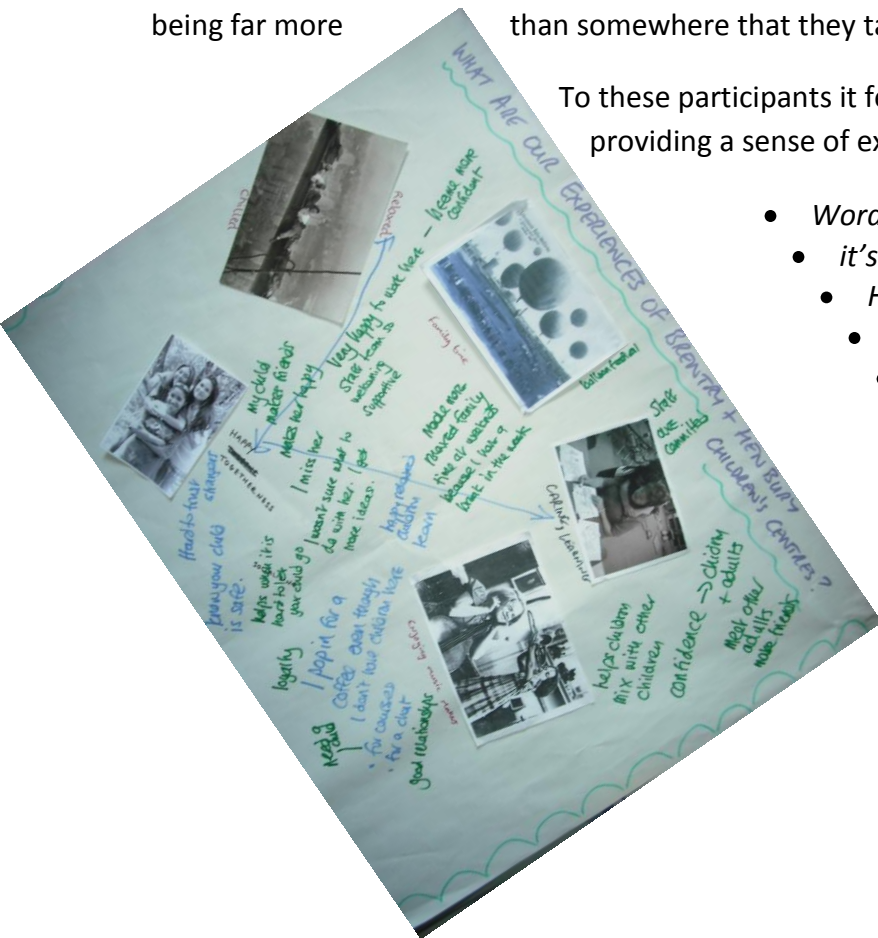
The process started with participants using photographs as metaphors to help them articulate and reflect on their individual and collective experiences of the Children’s Centre. There were some clear themes that arose from these table conversations. These included:

3.1 It’s more than just a children’s centre

One of the common feelings to emerge across the group was the value of the children’s centre being far more than somewhere that they take their children.

To these participants it feels more like a community centre providing a sense of extended family and social capital

- Words can’t convey how it is so much more than just a children’s centre
- it’s my second home
- Helps me deal with a heavy load
 - It offers a break – somewhere to go
 - you can’t manage without it
 - If I stay home I get stressed”
- They’re not just looking after the children – they’re looking after the parents too.
 - Offers an opportunity for adults and children to socialise
 - It sees everybody as an individual – as more than “just as a mum”
 - It feels like an extended family.
 - They work with different generations so it builds an extended family
 - It helps to build confidence and so helps with moving on
 - It offers a wider perspective, you can relate to other experiences.
- It makes you feel less isolated



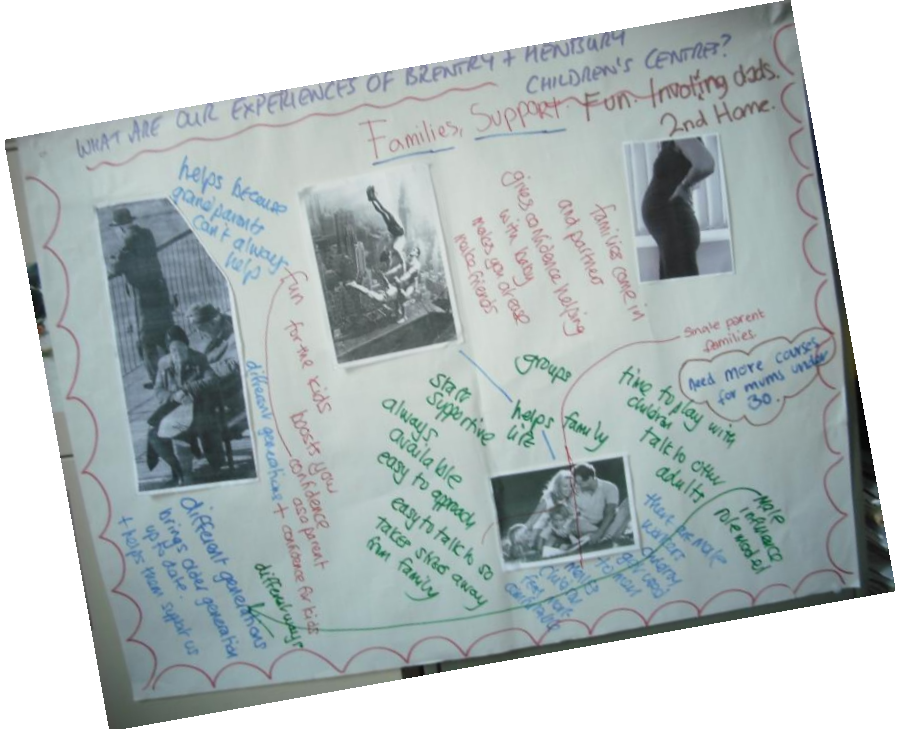


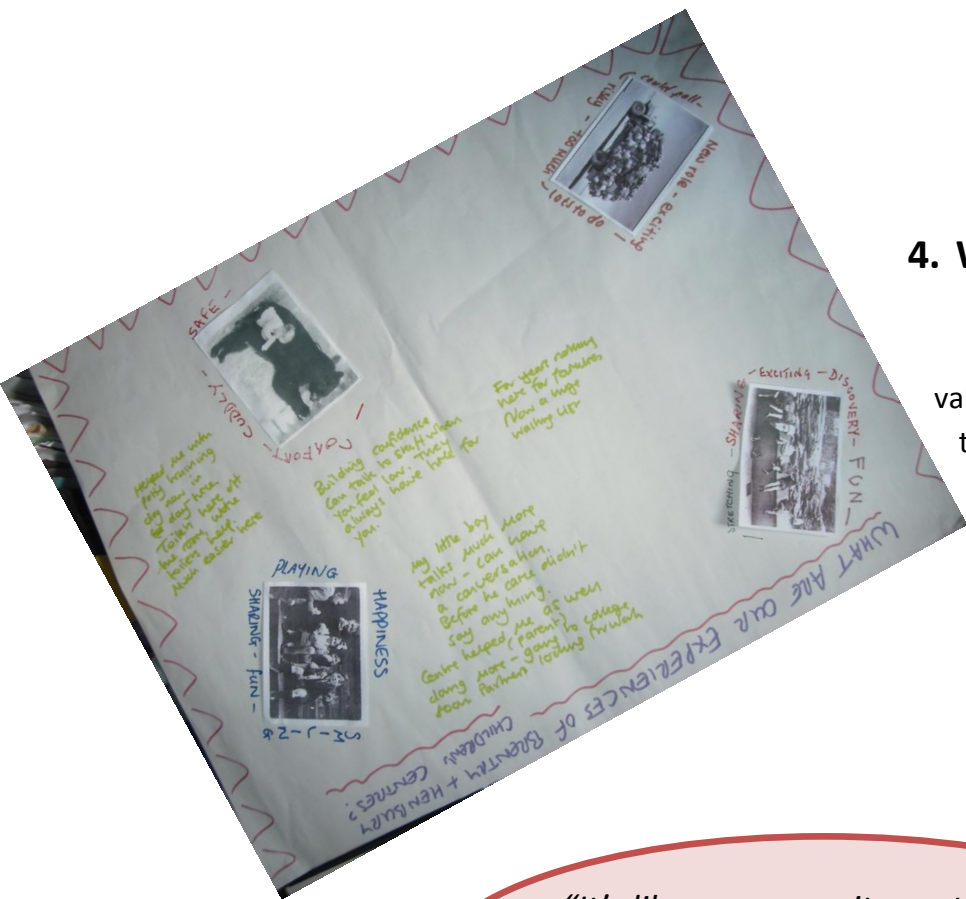
3.2 It offers a 'one stop shop' provision

- It is a safe place offering advice and support.
- It's a relaxed caring, supportive environment
- It offers support with accessing training and signposts you to courses in the community
- I have a lovely time every time I come – I love the groups

3.3 The staff are friendly and approachable

- The staff are approachable. It makes it feel like a family.
- No one judges you
- They are always friendly even if they're having a bad day
- Nothing would shock them
- There is always someone who can help
- There is a lot of experience in the staff team.
- You can see that they care about the children.





4. What do we do well?

The initial conversations were followed by an opportunity to further explore what was valued about the centre’s work through a structured evaluation exercise. In the main, the experiences described above were reinforced through this process. Even where suggestions for improvement were made, participants responses tended to highlight and reinforce the things that they most value about the Children’s Centre.

“It’s like a community centre. It replaces the ‘community’ that we’re missing these days”




The H-Form Evaluation Framework:

- What do you see as the main purpose of the centre?
- What are the good things about the centre that keep you coming back?
- What do you find not so good about the centre?
- On a scale of 1 10 How would you rate the centre?



4.1 It's a Community Hub


Conversations continued to stress the importance of the Children's Centre to participants' lives as a community centre that is more than just a children's centre. The significance of a 'safe' place where social attachments were formed emerged strongly from the data.



*It strengthens communities,
A place for meeting new people,
Helps your kids join the community,
Develops confidence
I can chat with other parents about
real issues,
A Safe environment,
Confidentiality,
Provides distractions from worries and
stress,
I have made friends here*

4.2 Support and Advice

The Children's Centre was seen as somewhere accessible and safe where participants felt that they could find help support and advice on a range of issues, where they feel safe to ask for advice, to join groups and to embark on training courses.



*Offers family support
It supports families who need
support,
Provides signposting
Provides help, advice and support for
all.
You receive ongoing support*

4.3 An Enriching Environment

The importance of the Children's Centre as a community hub was especially significant for participants taking steps back into learning or employment. The centre was felt to be welcoming and inclusive and as encouraging individuals to take 'small steps'. It was significant that participants felt able to seek support from the Children's Centre that they felt unable to ask for from other services.

4.4 Staff who go the Extra Mile

The respect and appreciation for and the attachment to the staff continued to emerge as strong factors valued by participants. The high quality, skilled, empathic and person centred approach of staff and their holistic way of working with the whole family were very strongly valued.

There was also, however, some evidence from staff that balancing this approach with maintaining paperwork was a challenge. This might be an issue that could be explored further.

I value the courses and information regarding other agencies

It's an enriching environment,

We enjoy learning in a fun environment

Cost is good! You can attend even if you can't afford it

It is friendly, welcoming

A safe and friendly environment for my children to play,

It feels easier to keep coming back and asking the same thing. It feels difficult to keep asking these questions at the clinic or doctors. At the clinic felt like I was being a nuisance. In a group of mums I felt that I could be a nuisance

Good quality childcare,

The staff know the families and what they need so well

They look after children in a safe caring way,

They meet you where you are emotionally,

I feel comfortable with friends and staff at the centre

When you are feeling down the staff are good to talk to,

I feel accepted at the centre

Our daughter always has something positive to talk about afterwards and really enjoys herself,

They can't do enough to help your child,

They have lots of time and patience, Nothing is too much trouble

5. The Way Forward: How could we develop the work of the Children's Centre?

"I'd give it 100! Numbers don't even start to describe it"

Later in the knowledge café participants reflected on the views and experiences they had heard and began exploring together possibilities for developing the centres' work further. Overall, there is considerable satisfaction and approval of the holistic model of community support that the Children's Centre offers. When asked to identify what might be 'missing' or what could be done 'differently' participants generally struggled to identify particular issues. Responses tended to indicate ways in which existing provision could be extended, for example *"more courses for parents under 30"*; *"make sessions longer"*. The perception was that they would like more of the things that they enjoy.

Some of the initial ideas for development included:

5.1 Bridging the gap

The strong social, emotional and familial attachment to the Children's Centre that was identified in participant responses above was seen to inform the set of responses that indicated an anticipated (or real) sense of loss that would be experienced when children in the family reached age five and the parents would no longer have a legitimate reason to attend the centre. Participants expressed a desire for support during this time of transition and for stronger links or bridges to be established between the Children's Centre and the Primary School and other key agencies and groups in the community to whom parents may have to turn for advice and support.

Participants also indicated that they would value transition support to take advantage of new opportunities outside the centre once they have acquired their new found confidence and skills. There was, however, one response that indicated a different view –

- *What happens when your child is 5?*
- *You need a child to come here.*
- *You can't attend courses here without child ... but he is at school full time!*
- *Need to bridge the gap beyond 5 – extend the way the centre works into school to support transition*
- *We need something for the over 5s especially during the holidays*
- *Need to spread the concept of the children's centre into schools*
- *Need to build links with other community provision (schools, churches)*
- *Need to make better link with the Job Centre*

that it was possible to return. *“You can keep coming back even when your children have left - you can come back for courses – cooking, return to work skills, benefits advice”*
This dissonance in perspective could potentially be explored further.

5.2 Reaching Out

There was recognition that the Children’s Centre encouraged the forming of a strong form of *bonding social capital* and created a powerful sense of belonging. However, this also revealed a need to strengthen forms of *bridging social capital* and to encourage a more outward facing inclusiveness. Most participants felt a strong attachment to the site that they ‘normally’ attend and expressed some degree of *otherness* about the people who attend the other sites. Furthermore, there was a sense that there were different patterns of usage in the centres sites and that each site offered different provision.



- *We need better education for members on cultural awareness,*
- *We need to build links to other religions,*
- *Need to reach out more to minority groups (Polish)*
- *We need more signposting for what the Children’s Centre can offer.*
- *I feel looked down upon at Brentry, not at Henbury*
- *They tend to be older mums at Brentry. Younger mums at Henbury*
- *More work with dads*
- *More trips in the summer hols for all aged children - and cheap*
- *Group Day Trips make it cheaper – also paying by instalments*

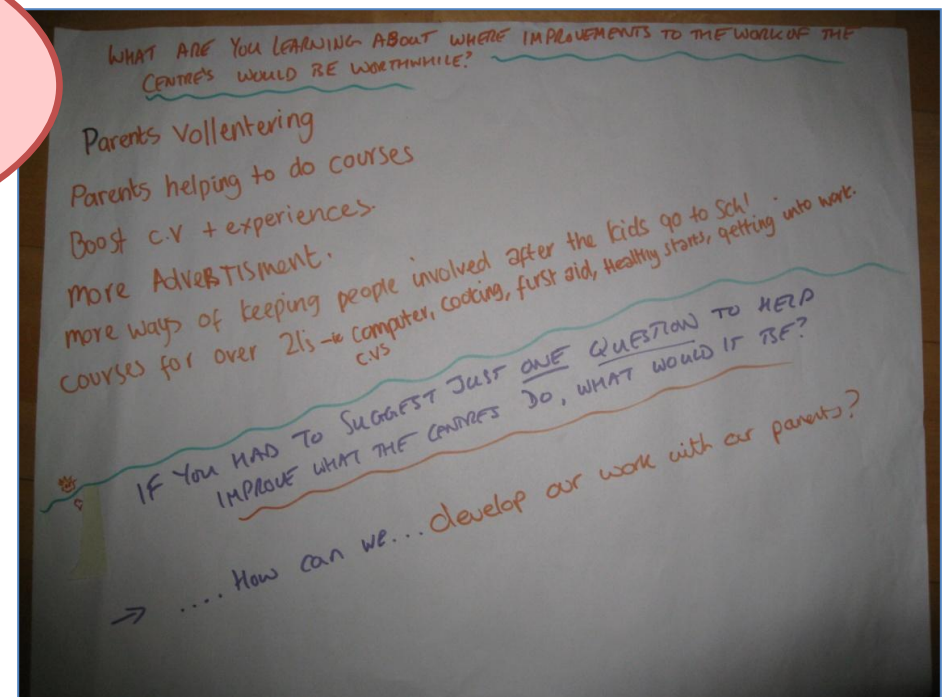
There was also a feeling that the impact of the Children’s Centre could be extended to reach more members of the community and to attract people in the community who currently do not use the centres. This might, for example, involve raising the profile and awareness of the children’s centre in secondary schools so that when children become adults themselves they know about the services on offer at the centre. We also noted the absence of children and parents from minority ethnic groups in the centre. Some participants suggested that work on cultural awareness would enhance provision whilst also attracting a wider spectrum of community members to use the facilities.

5.3 Growing your own

The strong sense of attachment, safety and confidence building that was expressed by so many participants led to the suggestion that the Children's Centre had a valuable role to play in capacity building in the community. Participants felt that they, and their families, have skills to offer and that the Children's Centre might make use of this resource through supporting volunteering and through parent led courses. However, there were two comments made about '*unwanted peer advice*' that had been received from another parent. Whilst being an isolated incident, this does suggest the need for appropriate training and supervision of any volunteers. Further research could usefully focus on exploring possibilities for parent-led provision.

There was an acknowledgement that the Centre could benefit from more direct involvement from users as Trustees and there may be scope to explore how centre users can become more directly involved in governance, decision making, development and provision of centre activities and services. Participants could envisage a role for volunteers in collecting evidence for ongoing monitoring and evaluation and community appraisal

- *Would like to be able to volunteer*
- *Support parents to become volunteer workers*
- *Use the groups to involve parent's skills*
- *Draw on parent's skills*
- *Use parents to help more*
- *Use volunteer community researchers*
- *Use volunteers to collect stories of experience*



6. Next Steps

This initial evaluation has revealed the extent to which both parents and staff value the work of the Children's Centre as well as a tentative indication of how and where the work of the Centre might develop further and how further research and inquiry could be focused. To inform next steps participants were invited to suggest one question that would help to guide the development of the centre's work.

Responses included:

- + How can we develop our work with parents?*
- + How can we support those families with children over 5?*
- + How can we ensure all parents know about the other centre and use it?*
- + How can we develop a resource base for children with special and extra needs with inclusion being a focus?*
- + How can we build the community and raise more money?*

7. Concluding Observations

This initial piece of work has provided some clear validation of the work of the Brentry and Henbury Children's Centre in terms of the creation of an enriching environment providing a highly appreciated community resource, high calibre of staff and a quality of support and provision. At the same time, the group participants provided a very clear way forward for potential areas of further research and development.

Building on the suggestions from the group, potential further evaluation could focus on:

- i) Gaining a better understanding of different usage patterns across the Centre's sites

- ii) Finding a way to talk to members of the wider community, including those who currently do not use the Centres and a wider spectrum of professionals (such as social workers, health visitors and speech and language therapists) to find out their perspectives on using the centre. This could involve parents and staff being supported to develop a community appraisal process whereby UWE researchers train community members to become community researchers. In this way children's centre members develop some skills whilst at the same time becoming more involved in the development and running of the Centre.

- iii) Setting up a process for ongoing evaluation that would be embedded in the everyday life of the centre and would serve to celebrate the life and work of the centres as well as provide insightful monitoring and evaluation data. A number of participants talked about the need to record the successful outcomes of the Centre's work through collecting and using stories (visual as well as written) to both provide feedback and 'showcase' the work of the Centre. UWE researchers could work with Children's Centre staff and users to develop a process that would simultaneously celebrate the Centre and its role in the community as well as provide an ongoing monitoring and evaluation of provision that could be embedded in everyday practice.

Appendix:

FEEDBACK – HOW DID YOU FEEL ABOUT THE SESSION TODAY?

- *Great lunch! Good to hear everyone's view*
- *Very beneficial. Got to know more about both centres, from staff and parents I met*
- *Great opportunity to share experiences and to get such positive feedback*
- *Very useful to hear views from both staff and other parents and to see how it may effect the centre. Thank you*
- *Good to share ideas, listen to other peoples similar thoughts*
- *Good to hear from parents how they feel about the centre and what we provide*
- *Good to meet parents and spend time talking together*
- *Encouraging to see similar views about the centre*
- *Good to discuss what parents think about the centre and how they rely on us for many different things. How we can extend our practices into the community*

Contact Details

For further information about this work please contact:

Dr. Billie Oliver

Department of Health and Applied Social Sciences

University of the West of England (UWE)

Glenside Campus

Blackberry Hill

Stapleton

Bristol

BS16 1DD

Telephone: 0117 328 8887

Email: Billie.Oliver@uwe.ac.uk