

Inspection report for TEN6 Manningtree Children's Centre

Local authority	Essex
Inspection number	384152
Inspection dates	14–15 February 2012
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Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
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Linked school if applicable	Not applicable
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: March 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 manager, the area development manager, the senior leadership team, other members of staff, a group of nine parents and carers, members of the partnership board and key partners.

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

Information about the centre

Manningtree Children's Centre is a phase two centre, designated in September 2007. The centre meets its core purpose and provides child and family health services, family support and parental outreach and links with schools and children's information services. While it does not provide integrated day care directly, or through a linked provider, it works with local day care providers and childminders.

The centre serves an economically and socially mixed community. The vast majority of the local population is White British and only 4% from minority ethnic backgrounds. There are 660 children under the age of five living in the reach area and 997 under the age of six. The unemployment rate in the area is relatively low with 11% of children under five in households dependent on workless benefits. Within the centre's reach, there are also pockets of significant deprivation where a higher proportion of families are living on low incomes or benefits. The reach area is largely rural with clusters of small villages. It is spread out over a large area beyond the small town of Manningtree within which the centre is located. Rural isolation crosses both social and economic boundaries, and support for emotional well-being as a result, especially for new mothers of all backgrounds, is an important element of the centre's provision. The area's proximity to London means that a high proportion of local people commute to work, especially fathers.

The range of services delivered at home or through more local community centres and church halls is significant as a result of the rural nature of the centre's reach area. The centre itself is very small and based within the health clinic in Manningtree. Some services are delivered on-site, particularly those linked to health, and use is made of an adjoining community hall to provide, for example, play activities and a toy library. Children's skills, knowledge and abilities on entry to Early Years Foundation Stage are close to those expected for their ages.

The centre is currently governed by the Anglian Community Enterprise on behalf of the local authority but will be governed by Barnado's from 1st April 2012. The centre leader is the area manager for three children's centres in the Tendring district. The centre works in cooperation with all nine centres in Tendring to provide services that complement each other and to share resources and staff.

Inspection judgements

Grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Overall effectiveness

The effectiveness of the children's centre in meeting the needs of and improving outcomes for families

2

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

2

Main findings

Manningtree Children's Centre meets the needs of its users successfully. It makes an effective contribution to good outcomes for those within its reach area because of the good quality of support it provides. Services are tailored particularly well to the rural nature of the area served by the centre. Extensive use is made of localised community centres and one-to-one support in the home to reach an increasingly wider range of users, including those from key target groups.

Strong partnerships with a wide variety of providers, including health professionals and adult learning, make a very positive contribution to improving outcomes for users. Centre staff have a very clear understanding of the varied needs of children and families, including children with disabilities and those with special educational needs as well as those who are experiencing rural isolation. While the centre is doing well in improving the engagement with services of most groups, there are some variations in the levels of engagement. Through its own analysis, the centre has identified that comparatively fewer lone parents or families with children who have a disability make use of the services provided. It has begun to address this and increase numbers but this work is at an early stage.

The centre is successful in engaging fathers in joint activities with their children. Careful timing of the sessions has been key to their success. Users have a strong voice in the way services are shaped to meet their needs. Parents told the inspectors that all staff ask for feedback and tell them how well sessions have met their needs and the needs of their children. All users contribute, including those supported at home on a one-to-one basis. One parent said, 'You can see that they've taken your views into account because they change things for the next time.' Users are confident to speak as they find because they know their views are valued. The Parent Voice Group is a powerful mechanism that features well in decision-making and in gathering the views of a wide range of users.

Outcomes across all indicators are good when compared with local and national results. The good provision for learning and development, for example, has contributed to the significant rising trend in the numbers of children that complete the Early Years Foundation Stage having met, and in many cases exceeded, age related expectations. Sessions at the centre, such as 'Messy Play', are vibrant and exciting and give opportunities for children to develop confidence to experiment with new materials and resources. Parents were fulsome in their praise of the 'Stay and Play' sessions and how these help their children to develop social skills.

The senior leadership team is keen to innovate and try new and creative methods of reaching out to all in the community, especially those most in need. The centre manager sets a very positive tone and her focus on developing strong relationships, internally and externally, provides a firm foundation for the work of staff. Consequently, staff are warm, welcoming and highly inclusive.

The use of data has developed well to provide accurate assessments of the range of groups within the community and the levels of need. These are being used well to shape services, meet identified needs and identify target groups. Self-evaluation increasingly focuses on impact and, in most instances, there is a good understanding of the impact of different elements of the services offered. However, there are some gaps in data and analysis. For example, it is not always clear how services have impacted on the different groups participating, such as those whose circumstances make them vulnerable. Nonetheless, a wide range of evidence is collected to inform planning for the future and improvement. Case studies provide a powerful analysis of how well, or not, individual needs are met and there is a clear track record of the positive impact of the centre on the lives of children and families in the area. This, coupled with clear action plans, points to good capacity for further improvement.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Build on work done to identify the uptake of services by different groups of users and to engage more from those groups where take-up is lower.
- Develop the use of data further to analyse the impact of services on different groups of users, particularly those from groups that may be more vulnerable due to their circumstances.

How good are outcomes for families?

2

Parents feel less isolated and more confident as a result of the centre's work. Many report that joining centre activities has provided them and their children with opportunities to meet and socialise with others. This has also contributed well to their emotional well-being, particularly for new mothers who, having left work in many cases to have their babies, find themselves isolated and potentially vulnerable to post-natal depression..

Data indicates that figures for breastfeeding are much higher than average and that breastfeeding is well sustained beyond six to eight weeks after birth. Obesity levels are low, helped by cookery sessions and support for preparation of meals for young children. Parents have a greater appreciation of the social aspects of eating a meal together. They commented on how the 'Stay and Play' sessions had helped their children to develop understanding of how to share a meal with others and to try new foods. Parents also gain useful knowledge about their baby's development and the value of baby massage both as a social activity and in its role in supporting a closer relationship with their child. One parent has obtained accreditation in baby massage and now works as a volunteer at the centre with plans to set up groups of her own.

Parents say that they feel safe at the centre. Adult learning classes are well attended. Particularly popular are the courses on first-aid and dealing with tantrums from toddlers. The safety packs provided are appreciated and there is good take-up of safety equipment for the home. Case study examples show that good multi-agency working and a clear understanding of the Common Assessment Framework are helping to keep vulnerable children safe. Users are confident that their children are safe at the centre and that they are able to share any concerns with staff.

Parents and children attending activities enjoy playing and learning together. Children are inquisitive and participate enthusiastically. Activities particularly support children's social skills and their language through interactions with staff, their parents and other children. Parents confirm that they take away useful ideas of activities they can do at home with their children from those modelled in sessions they attend. Trips and activities, such as exploring forests, help children to increase their knowledge and understanding of the world and have a positive impact on their physical development. Children learn to solve problems and develop early counting skills. Creative development is enhanced well through play activities, and opportunities to paint and make things using a wide range of materials. Children learn a lot by taking part in the local children's carnival.

The toy library is popular. One parent commented on how wonderful it was as it gave her child access to a far broader range of toys and that it was 'great to be able

to go and choose another toy every few weeks'. The learning and development at sessions offered through the centre and the work with pre-schools and childminders are helping to prepare children well for school. Children's behaviour is good and they develop strong relationships with other children and adults. The rapidly increasing numbers of children over the last three years who are completing their Reception Year with knowledge and skills that are at least in line for their age is a positive indicator of the centre's good contribution to their learning. Early Years Foundation Stage data shows that children's development by the age of five is particularly good in personal, social and emotional development and the language they develop to help them discuss their ideas.

Training and adult learning courses in literacy and numeracy help to increase parents' readiness for work. Case studies and feedback from mothers returning to work indicate that they are much more confident and well prepared as a result of the services provided by the centre. Support for accessing benefits ensures improved economic well-being for families.

The ethos at the centre is positive and encourages parent and carer participation.. New relationships prosper and enable users to be mutually supportive. Many users gain confidence to volunteer for roles both within the centre and more widely in the community. The mix of parents, especially socio-economic mix, is good with fathers also engaging well. The extent to which lone parents and those with disabled children use the centre's services is more limited though beginning to increase as the centre focuses more specifically on improving engagement with them. The centre's outreach work with pre-school settings and childminders is helping to identify and support early intervention for children with disabilities and those with special educational needs. Case studies and parental feedback indicate the positive impact of speech and language support on children's learning and development and the success of, for example, the dedicated speech and language therapist and play-and-talk sessions.

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	2
The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	2
The extent to which all children and parents, including those from target groups, enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	2
The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships and parents, including those from target groups, contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	2
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents, including those from target groups, are developing economic stability and independence including access to training and employment	2

How good is the provision?

2

Centre staff know their users and the local community well. Partnership work with a wide range of agencies, including in the voluntary sector, is well established for the benefit of families. Outreach work and the work in more localised community venues make good in-roads into engaging groups and individuals who may be more vulnerable or otherwise more difficult to reach. The centre has done a particularly good job in engaging fathers, countering rural isolation and establishing key services in the more deprived and disadvantaged areas of its reach. Some good work has been undertaken to increase engagement among target groups. For example, a focus group meeting of lone parents provided useful insights into their needs and how services might be tailored so as to increase participation. There is good support available for families with children who have a disability or additional needs through a service level agreement with a voluntary sector organisation. A sensory room is available at another Tendring children's centre and parents can borrow sensory toys and equipment. However, the centre rightly recognises that it is not doing as much as it could to engage these two groups.

The centre's work benefits from close working with health visitors and mid-wives who often carry out the initial registration and help to promote the centre's services to new parents. Services are well supplemented by services offered at other centres within the Tendring area. These are planned to complement one another and enable wider choice for families both in terms of activities but also in terms of timings.

Learning and development are well promoted for parents and their children. Sessions such as 'Stay and Play' are well planned and take into account the needs of all groups of children. The modelling provided by staff is excellent and provides parents, especially new parents, with high quality examples of how to get the best out of their children. Centre staff are particularly effectively in supporting children's transition to school through their work with pre-schools and nurseries. There are many opportunities for parents to develop new skills and improve existing ones.

The quality of care, guidance and support is good including to families in the target groups. Centre users find empathetic staff and very good signposting to a wide range of services to meet their individual needs. Well established referral systems are effective in identifying families whose circumstances may make them vulnerable. For example, there is an alert system to advise centre staff if a family is about to be made homeless, and this enables the centre to provide relevant support. Home visits lead to improved care and support, especially for target groups.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

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

How effective are the leadership and management?

2

The centre is led and managed well. The centre leader and development manager work together to provide a clear sense of direction. This is underpinned by high expectations and ambitious goals for future development. Excellent communication ensures staff and partners work as a unified team, confident about what they are expected to deliver. The net outcome is an integrated service of good quality delivered jointly with partners. Representatives from partner agencies who met the inspection team spoke highly about the centre and the driving force behind it; most said how much they enjoyed working with centre staff.

Governance arrangements are good. The partnership board oversees all nine children's centres in the Tendring area and provides a good strategic steer. It is particularly strong in holding partners to account and ensuring good value for money. Members of the board have a reasonable grasp of the centre's overall performance but not always sufficient detail about strengths and areas for development. A locality board provides more local oversight of initiatives and projects. There are effective two-way communication links between the Parent Voice Group and the various governance boards and parents are represented on the locality board. Hence, key decisions taken by the partnership board are well informed by users' views.

Systems for gathering relevant data, analysing it and assessing the impact of the services delivered have developed well over the last year and are becoming more sophisticated. There is a vast range of data and information and a wide range of methods for assessing impact. These include case studies, 'distance travelled' analyses where users complete questionnaires before and after participating in a service, attendance data, and data provided by partners. This wide range of information is used well to inform services. Case studies are used particularly well to help to shape services to meet users' needs. However, sometimes the data is not analysed enough to measure the impact of services on different groups of users. While staff know broadly how well they are doing with different groups, there are missed opportunities to drill down in more depth. This means data are not always there to support the analyses on the full impact of the centre's work. Nonetheless, there are examples of some powerful work as a result of the centre assessing how well it is doing to engage its local community. For example, an initiative described as 'Bridging The Engagement Gap' takes a comprehensive view of a wide range of evidence to identify why families might not be engaging with the centre's services.

The resulting action plan, currently being implemented, outlines a very thoughtful range of strategies for removing barriers, perceived or real, and securing even better engagement.

Comprehensive safeguarding arrangements are documented well. All staff, including volunteers and members of the partnership board, undergo appropriate checks including Criminal Record Bureau (CRB) checks. Partner agencies confirm the suitability of their staff to work in the centre. Staff are confident about using the Comprehensive Assessment Framework. Protocols for sharing information between partners where there are concerns about safety or emotional well-being are well established.

The centre promotes equality well and embraces enthusiastically the diversity of its community. Staff are proactive in their approach; for example, development of 'singing and signing', pictures and visual aids, signs in languages other than English are just some of the strategies to hand. Staff are welcoming and use visual clues to communicate effectively with those who are at the early stages of understanding English. Practice for disabled users, including children, is inclusive and staff are keen for more families with disabled children to use the centre's services. Initial work to understand why some do not suggests that families are already working with many agencies and potentially feel less need to engage with the centre. Early identification of children with disabilities and those with special educational needs are promoted well through the centre's work.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day-to-day management arrangements are clear and understood	2
The effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secure improvement in outcomes	2
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	2
The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties	2
The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults	2
The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated 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	2

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

None

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance *Complaining about inspections*, which is available from our website: www.ofsted.gov.uk. If you would like us to send you a copy of the guidance, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

Summary for centre users

We inspected the TEN6 Manningtree Children's Centre on 14–15 February 2012. We judged the centre as good overall.

We very much enjoyed our visit to your children's centre and would like to thank all of you who gave your time to speak to us and tell us your experiences of using the centre. Your views have helped inform us of how well the centre is doing and we have mentioned some of your comments in the report.

The centre is led and managed well and staff are keen to make it even better. It is a welcoming place and provides a positive environment where you tell us that you enjoy time with your children, playing and learning together. Staff make sure that the centre is a safe place for you and your children, and good safeguarding procedures are known by all staff. The centre is well established as part of the local community and attracting more and more families into the centre. The way the centre takes its work into the local community, including working with some of you in your homes, is a particular strength of its work. Good support is provided on health matters and to new mothers. Centre staff work well with staff from other organisations such as health, Jobcentre Plus, adult education, local pre-school settings and schools. The inspectors were impressed by the good-quality support provided for you by the small but dedicated staff team. They listen carefully to your views and how you think the services provided could be improved. You told us that staff make changes to the programme and way they deliver their services based on what you say. Some of you, however, felt that the activities for children are on an age-basis, making it difficult for those with two children of different ages to take part. Centre staff assured the inspection team that they are flexible about age. The centre will make sure this is better communicated to all. The centre values highly, and respects, all its users and is sensitive to each individual's needs.

A wide range of services are provided and a broad range of families are making use of these. Those of you who use the centre say that you very much value the activities and support on offer. We have asked the centre to reach out to even more children and families so that they benefit from the centre. The centre collects a great deal of information about who uses the centre, what they do and how they benefit.

However, this information is not always analysed effectively to help the centre staff understand how well its services are being received, especially with different groups of users. We have asked the centre to improve this aspect.

We would like to wish parents and carers the best for the future.

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