

Inspection report for Six Ways Children's Centre

Local authority	Birmingham
Inspection number	362568
Inspection dates	21–22 September 2010
Reporting inspector	Graham Sims AI

Centre governance	Governing Body of Mansfield Green Primary School
Centre leader	Catherine McKearney
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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Linked school if applicable	Mansfield Green Primary School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Mansfield Green Nursery

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.

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 one additional inspector and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the centre's interim manager and staff, representatives from the local authority, the Chair of the Advisory Board, the Chair of the Governing Body, headteacher and deputy headteacher of Mansfield Green School, parents and users of the centre. They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

The centre was established as a phase 1 children's centre in March 2007. It is located in a self-contained wing in the same building as Mansfield Green Primary School and Mansfield Green Nursery. It is managed by the school's governing body, which receives the support of a local advisory board. At the time of the inspection, the centre's manager and deputy manager had both been absent on long-term sick leave for three months. The centre is currently being supported by the local authority's monitoring and intervention team which, in agreement with a nearby children's centre, has deployed a manager to support the centre and oversee its affairs for two days a week. The centre currently provides four two-hour stay-and-play sessions for parents and children and an additional session for childminders at another location. There are no day-care or crèche facilities at the centre.

The centre serves a community which experiences high levels of social and economic disadvantage. Nine out of ten of the centre's super output areas are in the most deprived 10% of wards in the country. Three-quarters of the families within the centre's reach area are from minority ethnic backgrounds, the largest groups being of Indian, Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Black Caribbean heritage. Levels of unemployment are high, and a significant proportion of families are on benefits. Evidence indicates that the skills and knowledge with which children enter the local

Early Years Foundation Stage settings are below those expected nationally for their age.

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 users and the wider community

4

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

4

Main findings

The long-term absence of the centre’s manager and deputy manager has resulted in a difficult period for the centre which has necessitated intervention from the local authority. In addition, the authority’s monitoring report to the governing body in July 2010 also highlighted a number of longer-standing weaknesses in the provision and leadership and management of the centre. To tackle some of these weaknesses, the local authority reduced the number of activities provided by the centre to enable staff to concentrate on the necessary training and development to secure future improvement. This intervention resulted in a skeleton provision but it is not broad enough to meet the wide range of needs present within the centre’s reach area or to ensure the promotion of equality and diversity. Users of the centre are rightly concerned that some of the courses and options offered up to the end of July 2010 are no longer available to them.

The problems of the centre are rooted in inadequate leadership and management. The governing body is insufficiently clear about its roles and responsibilities. Liaison between the centre and the school has been infrequent and ineffective. There has been too little oversight of the centre’s work and managers have not been held to account for the outcomes for the centre’s children and users. Resources have not been deployed effectively or efficiently to meet the needs of the community. Insufficient use has been made of the expertise of the local advisory board, and the local authority has been slow in identifying the centre’s weaknesses and providing effective support and training. As a result, the centre’s capacity for improvement is inadequate.

Although many changes are required and the longer-term prospects for sustained improvement are still precarious, the local authority’s intervention is having a positive impact in a number of areas. Training provided by the interim manager has improved staff’s understanding of the necessity to identify and address the needs within the

reach area. Staff appreciate the opportunity to plan activities more appropriately. They understand the importance of reviewing planned actions and evaluating the outcomes of their home visits. However, staff are not yet ready to undertake regular planning and evaluation without support. The authority's initial review in July highlighted major weaknesses in safeguarding, but these have all been rectified. All procedures to do with the safety of users and staff have been tightened, so that this aspect of the centre's work is now satisfactory. A major benefit from the last ten weeks has been the significant improvement in staff morale. Staff were very quick to point out to the inspection team that they had a much clearer understanding of their roles and responsibilities and felt far more valued and happy in their work. Their willingness, helpfulness and friendliness are evident in their interaction with users who visit the centre to make an enquiry or to attend a play-and-stay session. Their care and concern are evident in the thought which goes into the planning of home visits which are clearly having a positive impact on those families who receive such support.

Despite these improvements, there is an urgent need to develop a more effective range of services particularly those related to health which, at present, are almost non-existent. Monitoring and evaluation systems are insufficiently robust to demonstrate the impact the centre is having on outcomes for children and users in the area. Outcomes are inadequate in almost all areas because of the current weaknesses in provision.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Strengthen and improve the governance, leadership and management of the centre by:
 - developing the governing body's understanding of its role; strengthening its practice in overseeing the work of the centre; holding its managers to account; and ensuring efficient use of the centre's resources
 - strengthening the school's links with the centre to develop more effective liaison and ensure greater involvement of the school's senior leadership in the management of the centre
 - increasing the level of support provided by the local authority, particularly with regard to the provision of training for governors, centre managers and staff to develop sufficient leadership capacity to fulfil the core purposes of the centre
 - ensuring the advisory board takes full account of the views of the centre's users and plays a more prominent role in advising the governing body.

- Develop more rigorous systems for identifying the needs of the reach area and prioritising those needs which the centre will attempt to meet.

- Provide a broader range of services which meet the specific and prioritised needs of the reach area, particularly with regard to health issues.

- Develop rigorous systems to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the services provided by the centre to ensure that they improve the outcomes for children and families within the reach area.

How good are outcomes for users?

4

The centre is having a limited impact on improving the outcomes for parents and children because of the limited range of services and activities it provides.

Discussions with current users indicate that parents greatly appreciated and derived benefit from the wider range of activities and courses which were available up until July 2010. For example, breastfeeding drop-in sessions and first aid courses. Most of the available health indicators are below average. For example, a greater proportion of babies have low birth weight; fewer mothers initiate and continue breastfeeding; and more children of reception age are obese than is the case nationally. The centre is unable to point to ways in which it is contributing to improvement in these areas.

The centre has, however, significantly improved the attention given to the safety of children, users and staff. Parents feel the centre provides them and their children with a safe and caring environment. Home visits by the family support workers are effective in identifying needs and providing appropriate counselling and safety advice. Two sample case studies, show the centre's effectiveness in helping families whose children were in potentially vulnerable situations. A similar standard of care is provided for looked after children and those who are subject to Common Assessment Framework processes.

The current stay-and-play sessions are all targeted to meet identified needs, such as the development of communication skills and creativity. However, no assessments are made of children's skills in these areas when they first arrive at the centre and there is, therefore, no evidence to show how effective sessions are in meeting the needs of individuals and developing their skills. Data show that children are starting Nursery with levels of skills and abilities which are very low. Standards at the end of Reception are well below the national average.

The recent cutback in services has significantly reduced the opportunities for users to develop their confidence, skills and self-esteem and thus their potential to make a more positive contribution to the community. Although users are happy to voice their thoughts to centre staff, there is little opportunity for them to influence decision-making within the centre, as systems for gathering their views have fallen by the wayside. There is minimal representation of users' views on the advisory board. The lack of services is not helping adults and lone parents in the well above average proportion of households claiming out-of-work benefits to improve their economic stability or independence.

These are the grades for the outcomes for users

The extent to which children, including those from vulnerable groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles	4
The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare	3

concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	
The extent to which all users enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	4
The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships and users contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	4
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents are developing economic stability and independence including access to training	4

How good is the provision?

4

The most effective aspect of the centre's work at the present time is the visits made by the family support workers to families seeking advice and support or those referred to the centre by external agencies, such as health workers. The quality of record keeping together with the procedures for reviewing families' needs, have improved following relevant training. The centre signposts families to a variety of relevant support agencies and parents are encouraged to register their children for nursery education. Families appreciate the positive impact of the centre's support on their lives. The centre has around 30 open cases at any one time, but this represents only a small fraction of the need within the area. Vulnerable groups slip through the net because the centre fails to analyse available data and assess the needs of the area. The centre is not proactive in devising initiatives to reach these groups and as a consequence meets the needs of an insufficient number of users.

Although the size and number of rooms in the centre limit the range of activities which can be hosted, the facilities are not used efficiently. The one two-hour stay-and-play session which operates on four days a week is a significantly reduced offer to the community when compared with the four, five or six activities which were on offer every day earlier in the year. Some activities were run at satellite venues, but only one such activity now takes place. Partnerships with other agencies have not been explored sufficiently. Little information is available for parents about courses and activities elsewhere which could contribute to their learning and development and have a positive impact on outcomes for their children. There are no joint initiatives with the local Primary Care Trust at the present time. Although activities are planned for the future, they are unlikely to start before January 2011. Agreement with the centre has yet to be reached about which courses are likely to meet the area's specific needs.

Planning for the stay-and-play sessions is improving as a result of recent training, and the activities provided have a clear purpose. However, assessment arrangements are not robust enough to enable staff to know how successful they have been in improving the learning and development of the children who attend. The sessions do, however, provide a valuable opportunity for centre staff to get to know parents and carers. The range of languages spoken by the centre's staff also provides an important link with the many parents and carers in the area who do not speak English.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users	4
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all users	4
The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of users and the wider community	4
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to users within the centre and the wider community	3

How effective are the leadership and management?

4

For too long, the governing body and school's leaders have lacked a clear understanding of their responsibilities for the management and overview of the children's centre. The local authority has not been sufficiently diligent in ensuring all involved parties understand their roles. As a consequence, the centre has operated without the level of support envisaged when it was first established. Furthermore, there has been insufficient resilience to deal with issues, such as staffing problems, earlier in the year.

Development planning is weak and the centre lacks clear direction for the future. Self-evaluation is superficial and unsupported by evidence of impact. Users are not engaged effectively in developing and evaluating provision. In its vision for the future, the centre is insufficiently focused on and does not have enough insight into the needs and wants of children, families, different groups of users and the most vulnerable within its reach area. As a consequence, insufficient attention is given to promoting equality and diversity. The local authority has produced an outline development plan, but this has yet to be discussed and agreed by the governing body. Even over the last three months when the local authority intervened in the management of the centre, a common understanding of the exact nature of the authority's support and designated responsibilities remained unclear. While the decision to reduce the level of services during this period is understandable, it has resulted in inefficient use of the centre's physical resources, under-utilisation of the centre workers' time and poor value for money.

There are, however, signs of improvement. The new headteacher of the school, who had only been in post for three weeks at the time of the inspection, is keen for the school to have much greater involvement with the centre. The various authorities and partner organisations recognise the weaknesses and failings of the past and are working to bring improvement. For example, the local authority has developed a comprehensive training plan, which has been approved by the governing body, and the first steps are beginning to have a positive impact on developing the skills of the centre's staff.

There are plans to improve the ineffective partnership with the local Primary Care

Trust to provide a range of health-related courses in the future, and the Chair of the Advisory Board has ideas which may strengthen this aspect of governance. However, these are future plans, none of which has yet been fully implemented. The interim manager's passion and commitment are bringing about concrete improvements. Staff are enthusiastic and beginning to develop a clearer sense of purpose and understanding of their roles. In addition, safeguarding issues are clearly at the forefront when planning home visits and advising families. Records with regard to recruitment have been brought up to date and thoroughly checked. Most importantly, the centre has a staff, from receptionist to play workers to family support workers, who are committed, keen and eager to serve the community, and who show empathy and care for the centre's users. They are crying out for the leadership which will enable them to carry out their roles effectively and efficiently to improve the health, educational and employment outcomes of children and users within the centre's reach area.

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	4
The extent to which ambitious targets drive improvement, provision is integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community	4
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of users and the wider community	4
The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties	4
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 evaluation is used to shape and improve services and activities	4
The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services the centre has been commissioned to provide	4
The extent to which the centre supports and encourages the wider community to engage with services and uses their views to develop the range of provision	4

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

Inspectors looked at the self-evaluation form and data produced by the local authority. Discussions were also held with the inspection team which was concurrently inspecting the nursery provision at Mansfield Green Primary School.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected Six Ways Children's Centre on 21–22 September 2010. We judged the centre as inadequate overall.

Six Ways Children's Centre has experienced a difficult period while the centre's manager and deputy manager have been absent. The local authority has intervened to help the centre by providing the support of a manager from another children's centre for two days a week. The local authority decided to cut back the number of activities offered by the centre to review the organisation of the day-to-day provision and to provide training for staff.

From the comments we received, and discussions we held with you, we understand that the reduction in the number of activities has not been a popular move. Many of you enjoyed activities in the past, such as the first aid courses, the breastfeeding clinic and the zumba dance classes. Although we understand why the centre reduced its activities we feel that the current provision is inadequate. The centre has not listened enough to what you, the users, would like to see provided, and the managers have not done enough to understand the needs of the area. Among other things, the centre's purpose is to provide childcare for young children, health services relating to young children and their parents, and to provide advice, guidance and employment support for parents. The centre should be making a difference to the lives of people within your community, and this is not happening anywhere near as much as it should be.

There are still some good activities which are appreciated by those who attend. We saw, for example, a stay-and-play session, which was greatly enjoyed by the dozen or so children who attended with their parents. We were struck by the friendliness and helpfulness of the staff and how valuable it was for some of you to have somebody to talk to in your native language. We know that family support workers carefully prepare their home visits and effectively help those families they contact. However, these activities only reach a small proportion of the community and more needs to be done to help others.

The problems of the centre go back further than the recent absence of the centre's managers. The governing body of Mansfield Green Primary School is responsible for managing the work of the centre. From the very beginning, governors have not really understood the extent of their responsibilities. There should be regular liaison between the senior leaders in the school and the centre's managers, and this has not been happening. There should be opportunities for users to contribute to the management of the centre through the advisory board, yet there has been no formal way of gathering the views of you, the users of the centre. The local authority should have spotted the problems more quickly than it has.

However, things are starting to improve. Staff at the centre appreciated the support which the interim manager has provided. Morale has improved and the staff have a better understanding for what they are expected to do. Measures to ensure the safety of children, users of the centre and staff have improved. However, because the outcomes, provision, and the leadership and management of the centre are inadequate, we have asked the local authority to provide the necessary support to ensure there is a radical improvement in the way the centre is led and managed. We expect the centre to be much more methodical in the way it decides what activities it will provide and how it can best meet the needs of the local community. We have asked the centre to increase the range of activities provided and then to review how effective these activities have been in meeting the local needs.

We would like to thank those of you who spared the time to speak with us and who shared thoughts about the centre and the range of activities it is currently providing.

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