

Inspection report for Meadows Sure Start Children's Centre

Local authority	Nottingham
Inspection number	383702
Inspection dates	5–6 October 2011
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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	Tiny Toez@Meadows EY370056

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: October 2011



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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 one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the centre's staff, parents, representatives from the local authority, members of the advisory board and representatives from some of the centre's partners. They also met informally with parents and families using the services. Inspectors observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of documentation.

Information about the centre

The Sure Start Local Programme began offering services for children and families in the area in 2002. It moved into its current premises in refurbished former school buildings in May 2006, and was designated as a phase one Sure Start Children's Centre in September 2006. The centre sits in the middle of an inner city estate in one of the 30% most deprived wards in the country. Over a quarter of young children live in households where no-one is working and nearly 20% of adults of working age claim benefits. Just over 60% of school-age children in the ward are from minority ethnic groups. The main groups are those of Asian heritage (24%) and from a Black background (14%).

The centre shares a site with Greenfields Community School and provides the full core offer of services designed to support families and young children in the area, including family support and outreach, health services, links to Jobcentre Plus and a childminder network. It commissions early education and childcare through a service level agreement with a private childcare provider that runs from a self-contained unit in the children's centre. Tiny Toez@Meadows provides funded nursery education for 27 two-year-olds as well as for three- and four-year-olds. The three primary schools serving the estate also offer nursery education. Many children start nursery with skills below those expected for their age.

The centre is run directly by the local authority. In June 2010, Nottingham City Council reorganised its children's centre provision to sit within Family and Community teams which provide activities and services for 0-19 year olds. A service manager has overall responsibility for the 0-19 team in Meadows and Sneinton Children's Centres. She is accountable to Nottingham City Council for the delivery of services within the centres. The service manager works the equivalent of two and a half days per week with the centre and had been in post for three months at the time of the inspection. On a day-to-day basis, the centre is managed by a team manager. A joint advisory board represents the views of users and some service partners for Meadows and Clifton Children's Centres.

Inspection judgements

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

Overall effectiveness

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

3

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

3

Main findings

Outcomes for children and families who use the centre are satisfactory. In some respects there is clear evidence that outcomes for the area are improving, for example, breastfeeding rates and children's learning and development by the age of five. The number of families using the centre's services has increased over the last year, including for most of the potentially vulnerable groups, as has the number of families on benefits taking advantage of subsidised childcare to enable them to return to education, training or work. Individual case studies demonstrate the positive impact the centre has had on the lives of families, particularly where they have received tailored packages of support. However, because some groups say that they do not feel included and the extent to which they participate is low the centre's work to ensure equality of access is limited to satisfactory.

The centre relies heavily on monitoring participation rates, headline data on outcomes for the area and individual examples to evaluate the impact of its work. Whilst these are important, the centre does not routinely collate and analyse information, some of which it already has, to monitor the proportions of families and target groups taking part in different activities and the impact these have on their lives, for example, families' understanding of how to keep themselves healthy. As a result, the centre does not have a clear enough picture as to what is working and what is not, and its evaluation of its effectiveness is too generous. This is not helped

by the local authority confirming its judgements without sufficient evidence to substantiate them.

Provision is satisfactory overall with some notable strengths in the individualised packages of support and care. Statutory requirements with regard to safety and child protection are met and parents feel comfortable in sharing any concerns they may have with staff. All staff are committed to doing the best they can for the children and families in the community. Partnership working and the day-to-day sharing of information and informal communication is strong, ensuring that support is targeted appropriately for families. However, more formal systems to communicate with partners and services to regularly review the impact of their work and forward plan are not well established. The parents' forum has not met for nearly a year and so parents and carers have little say in shaping the centre's work in the longer term.

The centre's leadership has been through a period of transition. The new service manager is aware of the need to make better use of the data available and to improve strategic planning to focus on outcomes for children and families. However, in addition to the fact she has only been in post a short time, there have also been changes in governance arrangements for the centre. In addition, the reorganisation of services within the local authority has distracted senior managers over the last year. This does not mean that the centre is standing still. It recognises the need to adapt its programme in the light of changes in the community and in the context of resource levels. However, much is still at an early stage. It is because of this and because plans are not precise enough to really drive improvement that the capacity for future improvement is judged satisfactory rather than good at this point.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- In partnership with the local authority, strengthen the monitoring and evaluation of the centre's work to ensure that it routinely collects and analyses the data and information it needs to
 - evaluate more accurately the impact of its work on outcomes for families and children, particularly those in target groups and most in need of intervention and support
 - refine and improve activities to closely match the needs of all groups.
- Improve the strategic leadership and governance of the centre by setting clear targets and measurable success criteria and identifying milestones to check progress in improvement plans.
- Ensure that parents and partners have a greater input into evaluating and shaping services.

How good are outcomes for families?

3

The take-up of antenatal and postnatal appointments is good, with the other services and activities on offer at the centre promoted as part of the process. All mothers-to-be, other than pregnant teenagers, have their appointments with the midwife at the

centre. The health visitors based in the centre visit every new born baby within the first two months of life. Families take part in a range of activities which offer them opportunities to develop their understanding of healthy lifestyles, for example cookery sessions, and links with the community gardens encourages them to buy fresh produce from the local allotments. There is an increasing focus on opportunities for active, outdoor play for children through the recent development of the 'Sunshine Meadow', although regular access to outdoor activities is not yet the norm. Undoubtedly, there are some improvements in health outcomes in the area. For example, the proportion of children age five who are obese has fallen, but the centre does not have an accurate picture of its wider impact on families' healthy lifestyles.

Children in the centre are safe because the centre has established safeguarding procedures. Children subject to Common Assessment Framework procedures or child protection plans are well supported, particularly by the children's centre's workers who provide a crucial link between services. Individual examples point to the success of case work where parents are experiencing problems with managing their children's behaviour. In one such case, the mother later described her son as 'a lovely, helpful, fun little boy' who she was 'really proud of'. For some parents, the opportunity to get out, share what they are going and work through their feelings is a lifeline. For others, such as victims of domestic abuse, the centre has been crucial in ensuring their safety.

Behaviour of children taking part in centre activities is good. By the time children in the area are five, their levels of personal, social and emotional development and their communication, language and literacy skills are just below those found nationally. The impact of the centre on these outcomes is satisfactory and is improving as the centre strengthens its work with others. For example, its support for the childcare provider in developing its provision and the partnership with local schools and services to improve transition through the Early Years Foundation Stage, particularly for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities.

Adults benefit from a satisfactory range of learning activities and courses either in the centre or in partnership with the local colleges and schools. For some, this has been the stepping stone to further learning or employment, although the centre does not know readily how many participate or how successful they are. A recent volunteer programme run by the centre was successful for the handful who took part. They are all now in employment or continuing to gain experience through unpaid work. Access to the Jobcentre Plus adviser provides useful advice to up to 20 parents each week about a range of issues including benefits, training events and childcare, 12 have been supported back into work so far this year.

Parents have a say in the running of the centre in that they are invited to evaluate individual sessions or courses and, from time to time, are surveyed on their views. However, because this is more about ideas for the next session or satisfaction ratings than the impact the centre's services have on their lives their contribution to the governance of the centre is limited.

These are the grades for the outcomes for families

The extent to which children, including those from target groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles	3
The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	3
The extent to which all children and parents, including those from target groups, enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	3
The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships and parents, including those from target groups, contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	3
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents, including those from target groups, are developing economic stability and independence including access to training and employment	3

How good is the provision?

3

Data provided by the local authority and the sharing of information in local action groups ensures the centre knows the most vulnerable groups in the area. It uses this information to plan a programme of activities which adequately meets the needs of the community. Its outreach work is satisfactory. Take-up of activities and services is higher than the same period last year, including for most of the vulnerable groups, although the proportion of teenage parents engaged in the centre's activities has fallen. The centre is also aware that there are some people in the community that are not aware of the services on offer, particularly since the reorganisation of teams within the local authority. Staff acknowledge that they cannot simply keep doing what they have always done as the community changes. They are adapting the programme of services and activities and how they promote what is on offer to the wider community. However, this is not always thought through well enough and does not make enough use of information from other partners

Care, guidance and support provided for families are effective. Children's centre workers use assessment procedures well to encourage families to identify the support and service that they need so that staff can put a personalised package into place. Plans state clearly how long they will last for and what they will achieve. However, the centre's follow up to the activities that are on offer to all is not as strong. For example, the centre does not know whether those it signposts to smoking cessation or for drug and alcohol advice actually join the programmes and whether it makes any difference.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	3
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups	3
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups	3

How effective are the leadership and management?

3

The work of the advisory board as it stands is relatively new, since it has been reorganised twice recently. In the main, this has been to reduce the demands for attendance at meetings on different partners, but also to offer the opportunity to discuss locality issues. Currently, the role that partners, parents and carers play in making effective contributions is weak. Furthermore, the board's discussions are not sufficiently focused on the centre's priorities for improvement. In part, this is because, while the centre's improvement plan demonstrates a satisfactory understanding of what needs to be achieved to meet the needs of the area, milestones and targets are not clear enough. It is also because the local authority's systems for governance and holding the centre to account are not rigorous enough. As a result, the effective and efficient use of resources is limited to satisfactory.

Day-to-day accountability is clear, with established systems of supervision and performance management, complemented by appropriate opportunities for training and professional development. Staff are committed to the work of the centre. They understand which groups need to be targeted and are reflective about what is working and what is not. They generate ideas in discussion between themselves and with partners as to how activities might be adapted or changed. However, these discussions are not always channelled effectively to influence practice and provision.

The centre has successfully secured improvements in the proportions of nearly all groups that use its services. The co-location of portage workers has significantly increased the numbers of families of children with special educational needs and/or disabilities taking advantage of the services. Personalised activities for Asian women have had a positive impact on their confidence and well-being. However, participation rates for fathers and children of disabled parents are still low.

Monitoring and quality assurance by the local authority is improving the range of agencies using the Common Assessment Framework procedures and the quality of the assessments of families in need of support and intervention. Agencies are increasingly taking responsibility for early intervention and meet each week at the Locality Access Panel to decide which service is best placed to provide that support. Systems for handing over cases from social care for children on child protection plans or those who are looked after are clear.

Procedures for health and safety and vetting the suitability of staff are robust and staff are well aware of the procedures for safeguarding users. Centre leaders recognise that there are some aspects of practice that would benefit from reviewing in the context of best practice.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day-to-day management arrangements are clear and understood	3
The effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secure improvement in outcomes	3
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	3
The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties	3
The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults	3
The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services provided by the centre to meet its core purpose	3
The extent to which the centre supports and encourages families in the reach area to engage with services and uses their views to develop the range of provision	3

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

None

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Meadows Sure Start Children's Centre on 5–6 October 2011. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

During the inspection we held meetings with the centre's staff and some of the other people who come to the centre to run sessions or to help you. We also spoke to parents and would like to thank those of you who came in especially to meet with us.

Your views were very helpful and we took them into account when we made our judgements.

Overall, you told us you were pleased with the services and activities that the centre provides. However, some of you felt you would like a greater range of activities and a few of you felt that staff cuts were having an effect on the number or quality of the sessions. We judge that the centre provides a satisfactory range of activities and services which helps you to improve your parenting skills, and enables some of you to train and gain employment. We did find that the centre was aware that it needed to make some changes to the programme to make sure it meets everybody's needs and we have asked them to make sure they collect the information they need to do that.

You also told us that you appreciate the opportunities you get to suggest the activities that you would like to see and that you think staff will always consider suggestions for new sessions. We agree that they listen to you views on a day-to-day basis but we judge they could do more to involve you in longer-term plans, for example by re-starting the parents' forum. Similarly, we have also asked them to consider how they can involve the other services better in deciding what works and what improvements could be made to meet the needs of families in the area.

Some of you told us about the big difference that the centre makes to your lives and we agree that the children's centre workers are particularly good at working with parents to decide the right kind of help and support for individual families. In these cases it often makes a big difference to your lives. However, we found that the centre thinks it is making a bigger difference to children and families overall than is the case. This is because its plans are not always clear enough and it does not collect the right information to check the impact of them. So we have asked it to improve the way it sets targets for itself and checks on the success of its work.

Finally, you told us that you and your children feel safe and secure in the centre, and that you are confident you can share any concerns or worries you may have. We agree with you. The systems in place to ensure the safety of children and families in the centre are robust.

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