

Inspection report for Meadowside Children's Centre

Local authority	Northamptonshire
Inspection number	383523
Inspection dates	19–20 October 2011
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Linked school if applicable	Meadowside Primary School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	N/A

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: November 2011



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361

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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.

An inspection of Meadowside Primary School was carried out at the same time as the inspection of the centre under section 5 of the Education Act 2005. The report of this inspection is available on our website: www.ofsted.gov.uk.

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the head of centre and centre staff, a representative of the local authority, the chair and headteacher of the partner school's governing body, a member of the centre's advisory board, health professionals and partners who offer services, and parents and carers. Inspectors observed the centre's work and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

Meadowside Children's Centre opened as a phase two centre in November 2009. Northamptonshire County Council has delegated governance of the centre to the governing body of Meadowside Primary School. There is also an advisory board, which provides support and guidance to the centre. The centre is attached to the school and shares a joint reception area. The centre opens Monday to Friday, and one Saturday each month, for 50 weeks per year. A private organisation hires rooms in the centre for before- and after-school and holiday care for children in the local area. Activities for families take place at the centre as well as in a number of outreach locations including local community centres and a library. The head of centre manages six other members of staff comprising a family support worker shared equally with the school, two information officers, an early years assistant and two children centre workers.

The centre serves the communities of Burton Latimer and Barton Seagrave. These areas had a population of 14,953 in 2007. The very large majority of residents are of White British heritage, although the proportion of children aged 0 to four years old of minority ethnic heritage has risen from 4% in 2006 to 6% in 2010. Children's

skills, knowledge and abilities on entry to early years' provision are typical for their age. The area is within 70% of the most deprived in the country. It comprises owner-occupied terraced, semi detached and detached housing and local authority housing. As a small town, facilities are limited and many families travel to nearby towns for shopping and leisure activities. Rates of worklessness are comparable to other areas in the county.

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

Meadowside Children's Centre provides a good service for its local area. Staffing shortages experienced over the past year have led to operational difficulties, but the commitment and hard work of staff have ensured the needs of many families are met. Managers and the advisory board have clear vision for the centre and evaluate its strengths and weaknesses accurately.

Staff successfully promote healthy lifestyles among families. The centre has forged particularly strong links with local health visitors and midwives who run regular and helpful clinics. They encourage mothers to breastfeed their babies and improve the health of families. Similarly, staff from Jobcentre Plus and the Citizens Advice Bureau provide families with good support for employment and more general matters. Partnership work is strong and close collaboration with the co-located school helps children in their transition to the reception class. However, the centre does not have enough information about the local community from the local authority and its strategic partners to help it assess the needs of all vulnerable groups accurately.

Families feel safe at the centre and develop a strong sense of belonging and attachment to it. Staff provide entertaining activities and children make good progress in their learning, particularly developing their communication, literacy and language skills. Parents benefit from their interaction with each other and receive good advice, guidance and support from staff and partners. The standard of accommodation and resources is good. The centre has organised a parents' forum, and staff take the views of families seriously, responding positively to their suggestions.

Managers hold regular meetings with staff where review of their work and staff training is agreed, although no formal performance appraisals have taken place for over a year. Day-to-day management of the centre is effective. Improvement targets cover relevant issues, but are insufficiently specific and measurable to help the centre evaluate its effectiveness accurately. Staff give a high priority to safeguarding procedures and health and safety. They have a fully inclusive approach to their work with families and prioritise those vulnerable families with the greatest need. The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. The centre provides good value for money. The determination of staff to assure work is of a high standard and the good outcomes of the centre demonstrate that it has good capacity to make further sustained improvements.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Obtain more up-to-date and relevant data from the local authority and all strategic and local partners to improve the assessment of needs of vulnerable groups in the local area.
- Ensure development plans contain specific and measurable targets so the effectiveness of the centre's work can be evaluated accurately.
- Ensure all staff have a formal performance appraisal annually.

How good are outcomes for families?

2

Health outcomes for children and their families are good. Regular clinics run by health professionals have resulted in more mothers breastfeeding, and the centre has purchased breastfeeding pumps to encourage them to do so for longer periods. Users receive a lot of support to give up smoking, particularly during pregnancy. Snacks provided to families promote healthy eating. Families participate actively in a wide range of activities which promote their physical development, including exercise in the attractive outdoor play areas. Successful work with fathers has led to the formation of two football teams that play regularly; one for children and the other for fathers. However, the lack of accurate health data means that staff cannot measure the impact of their work effectively.

Families and staff feel safe in the centre. Staff place a strong focus on safety, carrying out risk assessments for all activities. The promotion of road safety is stressed. Staff run effective 'safety in the home' workshops and home-safety visits are made to the most vulnerable families. Parents, carers and grandparents benefit from paediatric first-aid courses. All staff have received training in the use of Common Assessment Framework and work with other relevant agencies well to support vulnerable families through this process. Managers provide good support to families who have child protection plans.

Children and parents achieve well and make good progress through their engagement with the centre. Children's scores for the Early Years Foundation Stage

attending the co-located school are high and staff help them make a smooth transition to the school's reception class. Inspectors observed a good session where babies fully enjoyed and explored their senses, by shaking musical instruments, exploring activity centres and immersing their feet in shaving foam. In another good session, slightly older children were learning how to manoeuvre wheeled resources, throw and catch bean bags and gain control of their bodies as they climbed and balanced on the soft playing equipment. Children learn how to solve problems as they complete puzzles and sort objects by colour. Children from a young age develop their communication, literacy and language skills well. Children's behaviour in the centre is good and parents benefit from the sensible advice given by staff.

Families feel they belong to the centre. One mother commented, 'My daughter gets excited every time we walk past the centre as she loves to come here'. Parents attending activities often make new friends and gain in self-confidence. Enthusiastic volunteers provide good support to families whilst developing new skills themselves, although they are few in number. The opportunity for centre users to develop skills by participating in more formal consultative groups is limited currently, although this is planned. A parents' forum meets around every three months, although managers acknowledge that families currently do not contribute in more formal ways to influence decision-making and governance.

The centre provides a broad range of information to families on job opportunities. Jobcentre Plus staff hold a weekly clinic in the centre, providing job searches and support to users looking for work. The Citizens Advice Bureau run a weekly session for more general guidance and an advisor makes monthly visits to help users access benefits to which they are entitled. This has led to successful outcomes for some individuals; for example, one user began volunteering for the crèche, progressed to working as a lunchtime supervisor in a school and is now employed as a teaching assistant. A few individuals are referred to college or training providers but the number of parents who have gained qualifications as a result of the centre's work is low.

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	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?

2

Staff have a good knowledge of the local area and assess the broad needs of the community well. They provide a wide range of services, readily making contact with families who need help most. The number of users registered with the centre is increasing steadily and attendance rates at most sessions are high. Attractive promotional material advertises when sessions are taking place, although the centre does not have a web site currently. The effectiveness of sessions is evaluated comprehensively by staff and feedback is taken from families regularly and acted upon. However, with the staffing resource being stretched too thinly at times, staff have focused their energies on face-to-face contact, and the information they hold about the area tends to be regional rather than local, or not sufficiently current.

The centre promotes purposeful learning well across the six areas of learning. Parents, carers and children play, learn and have fun together through activities of high quality. As one parent remarked, 'I am not sure who enjoys coming to the centre more – me or the children'. Sessions such as 'Rhyme Time', 'Story Sack' and 'Animal Boogie' provide good opportunities for parents and children to sit together and enjoy a lively range of stories and rhymes. The highly skilled and enthusiastic staff encourage all parents and children to participate as children develop their creativity during well-resourced imaginary play. An outstanding session held in a local library saw children playing with each other, learning the counting and other songs and having fun. The skilled worker gave a highly polished and entertaining performance leading the singing that was also greatly enjoyed by the adults.

The care, guidance and support provided for families are good. Comprehensive advice and guidance cover a broad range of topics, including health, employability and general matters. Interesting wall displays and leaflets provide a range of useful information, and staff signpost families to other agencies where appropriate. For example, during a 'Natter and Nosh' session, lone and young parents received effective support and guidance in an informal manner. This made them feel more confident to ask questions, share experiences and support each other. Strong support is available for families at times of crisis. One mother remarked how the centre had been 'her rock' at a particularly difficult time.

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 has experienced a difficult time with staff shortages in the year leading up to this inspection that has placed additional strains on the management of the centre. Nevertheless, through the hard work and passionate commitment of all staff, the centre has continued to provide a good service to the local area. The governing body of the school, and the advisory committee that oversees the work of the centre, provide good challenge and support. Members receive regular reports on the progress of the centre's work and take a keen interest to ensure the centre has a positive impact on the lives of local families.

The head of the co-located school and the head of the children's centre meet regularly and are clear about the aims of their work. Day-to-day management of the centre is good. The head of centre communicates well to staff and morale is high. Regular team meetings are held and focused individual staff meetings where work targets are set and training needs discussed. Despite this close supervision, formal performance appraisals have not taken place within the past year, although these are scheduled to commence soon.

Staff and partners have a clear understanding of their role in the community and judge their success by the impact they have on the lives of families, particularly the most vulnerable. The centre's self-evaluation is mainly accurate and the development plan highlights appropriate priorities for action. Targets by which the effectiveness of the centre's work can be evaluated focus appropriately on the impact of its work, but they are not always sufficiently specific and measurable.

The centre provides a welcoming and friendly atmosphere that is greatly valued by families. Accommodation is comfortable and the buildings are in a good state of repair. Children can play indoors and outdoors and there are high-quality toys to promote learning. The number of users at the centre has grown steadily since it opened and this has led to some cramped conditions, particularly in office space for staff. Staff consider carefully how to maximise the deployment of resources to benefit families. They are unafraid to make changes to improve staff efficiency where activities are not judged to be cost-effective, for example, by moving them to other venues where they are more popular. The centre offers good value for money.

Staff fully promote the inclusion of children and their families in all the activities. The centre is located in an area with a relatively low number of residents of minority ethnic heritage and staff have not identified the need to provide dedicated sessions for these families. Events to celebrate equality and diversity satisfactorily include a cultural food day, Chinese New Year and a Christmas party for lone parents. An awareness of other cultures is also promoted well through group activities and the broad range of resources, displays and other information. The centre is fully accessible to families with disabilities. A sensory room provides an excellent resource for children with additional learning needs, although its usage for this purpose is low.

Arrangements for safeguarding are good. Criminal Record Bureau checks are carried

out to ensure the suitability of all individuals working in the centre, including volunteers. Safeguarding information is kept on a single central record. Staff training covers safeguarding procedures, and the two designated safeguarding officers receive appropriate additional training. Staff are very clear how to react if children or adults express any concerns about their well-being. Informative first-aid courses take place throughout the year and helpful home-safety visits take place for vulnerable families. Fire-safety sessions are led well by fire service officers. Staff have highlighted a growing issue of domestic violence, and so they signpost families appropriately to relevant agencies for additional support.

Partnership work is good. Strong links with health professionals have led to very successful and integrated multi-agency work. Several clinics each week are run in the centre by health visitors and midwives. These introduce new families to the centre and enables families to become comfortable and familiar with the surroundings, making them more liable to participate in other activities. The link with the co-located school enables collaboration through joint training and the sharing of resources but there are too few links with other local schools.

Staff ensure the views of centre users are heard and responded to with appropriate action. For example, a day-time baby massage session was switched to the evening so that fathers could attend more easily with their partners. Regular feedback forms are given to families participating in activities, along with general questionnaires covering broader issues. These evaluations show a high level of parental satisfaction with all aspects of the centre's work. A prominent 'You said – We did' board displays actions taken by staff in response to the views of families.

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	3
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	3
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	2

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

The inspectors took account of the findings from the inspection of Meadowside Primary School. The school was judged to be satisfactory.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Meadowside Children's Centre on 19–20 October 2011 and judged the overall effectiveness of the centre as good.

We would like to thank you for your contribution to the inspection. Many people enjoy coming to the centre and appreciate the good care, support and guidance they receive from all staff. Some of you described how it had made a difference your lives and you now feel better equipped to deal with various problems.

We agree with your views that locating midwives and other health professionals in the centre for clinics is a convenient and easy way for you to meet with them. Similarly, having staff from the Citizens Advice Bureau and Jobcentre Plus helps you to gain advice on employment opportunities and other matters. The centre offers a safe and friendly atmosphere and managers ensure that all staff and volunteers undergo suitable safeguarding checks.

Staff organise a broad range of activities for you at the centre and other nearby locations which are greatly enjoyed. Families learn to play with each other and children behave well. Parents also gain from the support they receive from staff and other centre users. The centre has good links with Meadowside Primary School, but insufficient links with other local schools.

We believe the staff work very hard and are fully committed to their work. Managers evaluate the quality of the centre's work comprehensively, but we have asked them to make sure that all staff have a formal performance appraisal annually. We have also asked the staff to ensure that they have more up-to-date and relevant information so that they can meet the needs of all vulnerable families in the area. We want the centre to set more specific targets for further improvements. We know that staff listen to you when you discuss the centre's work with them and often make changes in response to your suggestions.

Once again, thank you to everyone who took the trouble to speak with us and we wish you every success for the future.

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