

# Inspection report for The Meadow Children's Centre

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<b>Local authority</b>	Kent
<b>Inspection number</b>	384163
<b>Inspection dates</b>	16–17 May 2012
<b>Reporting inspector</b>	Sheena MacDonald HMI

<b>Centre leader</b>	Karen Meyrick
<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	Not applicable
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<b>Linked school if applicable</b>	Not applicable
<b>Linked early years and childcare, if applicable</b>	The Meadow Children's Centre 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.

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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 acting centre leader, other members of staff, key partners, representatives of the local authority, the advisory board and parents.

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

## Information about the centre

The Meadow Children's Centre serves an area which is amongst the most economically deprived areas in England with high levels of unemployment and many families living on low incomes or benefits. Most families are of White British heritage and about 8% come from a range of other ethnic groups.

The centre opened in June 2006 and was designated as a phase one centre in January 2007. It provides a full range of services for its designation and is the main hub for health and family services for the area. As well as at the centre, services are also provided at a variety of other locations, such as the neighbouring school, the local library and a nearby church hall. The centre is managed by the local authority and is open 51 weeks a year for 10 hours a day.

The Meadow Children's Centre Nursery, which provides 45 places for children aged three months to five years, was inspected in December 2009 and judged to be outstanding. Children arrive at the centre with levels of skills and knowledge which are generally well below those expected for their ages.

## 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

The Meadow Children's Centre is a good centre. Parents are fulsome in their praise for the staff and about the positive impact the centre has on their own and their children's lives. This is because staff know their families very well and have developed excellent partnerships to make sure that they are reaching and supporting high numbers of local families, particularly those most in need. As a result, the range of services and the care, guidance and support the centre provides for its families are excellent.

The centre is very welcoming and, as one of its partners commented, 'It accepts people as they are.' The high priority given to the safeguarding of children and the protection of everybody who uses the centre mean that it is a safe haven. There are high levels of trust so that parents have confidence in sharing sensitive information and concerns. For many families, the centre and its staff have provided important and very effective support in times of crisis. One parent commented, 'The centre is my backbone.' Parents are routinely asked for their views and the centre takes these very seriously; as a result, parents know that what they say really matters and makes a difference.

Parents say that activities such as baby massage, breastfeeding support, yoga groups and activities such as the Little Stirrers cookery group help them to develop a better understanding of healthy lifestyles. The success of this work can be seen in significant improvements in the health and safety of families. For example, during the past three years, the percentage of mothers breastfeeding their babies has trebled, child obesity levels have improved and are now slightly better than average and there has been a significant fall in the number of young children admitted to hospital as a result of accidents. The cohesive partnership working with families where there are concerns about children's safety and well-being result in impressive reductions in risk and most of the children make good progress. Many families do not have access to gardens and the centre site itself limits the amount of this sort of activity. To compensate for this, the centre includes opportunities for large scale physical activities such as weekly toddler sessions in a local church hall. Despite this,

such opportunities remain limited.

Children who attend the different groups enjoy learning and become increasingly independent and confident as they explore the good range of activities and resources. Developing children's communication and language skills is a key focus and is emphasised in all groups as well as in activities such as the popular Breakfast and Books sessions. Children's achievement across all areas of learning is improving well and children make good progress from starting points which are often low. Well-targeted and well-informed support for the relatively high number of children with special educational needs means that they make particularly good progress. One parent whose child benefits from speech and language expertise said that it was 'a real boost' being able to access it in the centre.

As well as commenting on how the regular and well attended parenting courses help them gain a better understanding of aspects such as behaviour management and the importance of play, many parents also say how attending groups and courses helps them to meet people in similar situations and make friends. Centre staff are proactive in engaging families and helping them to learn and develop skills such as in numeracy, literacy and English for those who speak other languages. Parents have taken opportunities to become trained volunteers and eventually move on to further education or paid employment.

Senior leaders are strongly focused on improving the lives of children and families in the area and have established a strong sense of cohesion and clarity of purpose. There is very effective cooperation and communication with partners, including from the private and voluntary sector, so that expertise is shared and services complement each other, thus making best use of resources and providing excellent value for money.

Sharp and robust lines of governance, accountability, roles and responsibilities at all levels provide challenge and support to staff. The current systems clearly demonstrate that the lives of individual children and families are improved by the work of the centre. However, self-evaluation and analysis are not sophisticated enough to evaluate or measure fully the impact of the centre's work on outcomes for groups. Nevertheless, the centre has had a positive impact on the lives of children and their families for several years. This successful track record and broadly accurate evaluation of its own performance show that the centre has good capacity to improve.

## **What does the centre need to do to improve further?**

### **Recommendations for further improvement**

- Ensure that strategic planning is based on rigorous self-evaluation and identifies clear targets to measure success and demonstrate the impact of services on different groups of users in each outcome area.
- Seek ways to ensure regular and active outside learning.

## How good are outcomes for families?

2

The health and safety of children and families in the local area benefit from the range of activities and services on offer and outcomes in these areas are improving particularly well. For example, the under 18 conception rate has decreased significantly and hospital admissions caused by injuries to children and young people have fallen sharply so that they are lower than similar areas elsewhere. Nearly all families access the health services, such as the weekly well-baby clinic, Teens and Tots, and First Time parents groups. First aid and healthy eating sessions are included in all of the regular groups and free fruit and vegetables and healthy recipes are readily available. Parent feedback is very positive about the impact of taking part in activities such as the baby massage groups. One parent said the massage helped her baby with colic. Feedback from Baby Bumpkins, yoga-based physical activity sessions, is also overwhelmingly positive and, as one parent said, the sessions are 'a lovely bonding time and active for me too'.

Children and adults feel exceptionally safe and consistently behave safely in the centre. There are safe routines and practices in groups and staff provide excellent role models. During the inspection, adults responded calmly, appropriately and promptly to an emergency demonstrating that the policies work in practice. Close and effective working with health colleagues and social services ensures excellent support for the most vulnerable children and families, including for those that are subject to child protection plans. There is good evidence that levels of risk are significantly reduced as a result and children safer. The large majority of parents are confident to share experiences and concerns and to ask for help when necessary.

Over time, achievement as measured in the Early Years Foundation Stage profile has improved rapidly and is now close to the local authority average. The centre tracks the onward progress of its children and has strong evidence that those who come to the groups and the nursery achieve well. The gap between highest and lowest achievers narrowed considerably in 2009/10 but widened last year. Relatively high numbers of children in that cohort had special educational needs and also a higher than usual group of children were at the early stages of learning English. There are good links and communication with local schools and the impact of activities to help children make a smooth transition into school has been evaluated positively by school colleagues.

Children and adults make friends and treat others with respect. Parents feel they have good opportunities for informal peer support and are able to build friendships and confidence. There are regular and varied strategies for consulting parents and gaining their views and suggestions. The parent voice forum organises and

contributes to events such as a Pamper Day, which raised money for charity. A relatively high number of parents have undertaken training as volunteers and contribute to the centre, for example organising walks or by being breastfeeding buddies.

Nearly 40% of parents have taken part in a variety of courses, including numeracy and English for speakers of other languages which were observed during the inspection. Attendance and completion rates are good. These courses are often set up in response to parental requests and parents are active learners and confident to speak up. The centre, working closely with Jobcentre Plus, Connexions and the charity Tomorrow's People, supports parents to build skills and confidence, access training and increase their chances of gaining employment.

These are the grades for the outcomes for families

<b>The extent to which children, including those from target groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The extent to which all children and parents, including those from target groups, enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>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</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>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</b>	<b>2</b>

## How good is the provision?

**1**

Centre staff know their families very well and tailor their work very effectively to meet their needs. A very high and increasing percentage of families are registered, and in the areas of highest deprivation, almost all families access the centre. Health visitors and the community involvement worker visit families, sometimes together, to assess needs and identify appropriate support. Centre staff are persistent, carry out follow up visits and, in some cases, accompany families on their first visit to the centre.

The centre is welcoming and attractive. The staff make very good use of the different spaces to provide group sessions for adults and children and one-to-one support when necessary. Groups and courses are sharply focused on addressing the needs of target groups such as teenage parents, first time parents, families experiencing poverty and children with special needs. There are strong links with private and voluntary groups and advice is very clearly signposted. Services such as

Jobcentre Plus, Citizens Advice Bureau and speech and language support are highly thought of and parents comment on the convenience of having this sort of support easily accessible in the centre.

Parents say that their children are happy and enjoy learning in the crèche and that this gives them the chance to take parenting and adult courses. Sessions are well planned and there are plenty of opportunities for children of different ages to engage in interesting and enjoyable learning. Staff generally make good use of observations of individuals and sessions to amend and inform their planning. Staff are well trained and the principles of good early years practice underpin all of their planning. However, there have been some staff changes and a local authority decision to use temporary contracts is adversely affecting the quality and consistency of provision for learning and development.

The centre provides outstanding care, guidance and support. The ethos is welcoming and inclusive which helps to build confidence and trust. High levels of care are evident in all of the sessions and routines are secure. The highest priority is given to ensure the safety and well-being of children in need or at risk. The centre works closely with other services and there is careful planning to make sure that support is helpful rather than overwhelming. Parents are very positive about the individual support they receive.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

<b>The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of families, including those in target groups</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups</b>	<b>1</b>

## How effective are the leadership and management?

**2**

The centre is very well led and managed and, as a result, the staff are a cohesive team with a strong sense of shared purpose. The evaluation of staff performance is thorough and well linked to appropriate training, although the employment of temporary staff makes this a challenge. Local authority systems of management and accountability are clear and the levels of decision making are clearly defined. Steering group meetings are well attended with a good mix of partners and parents. This group provides good levels of challenge and support and members carry out observations of the centre's services as part of quality assurance procedures. The impact of the centre's work on outcomes for families is evaluated regularly. However, the management groups tend to focus more on the delivery and design of services rather than evaluating the impact the services have on particular groups of families. As a result, targets in the improvement plan are not always sharp or measurable.

The centre provides excellent value for money. It has remained within budget despite significant cuts in funding and registration figures for the centre are high and increasing. Activities are very well focused on meeting the needs of the most vulnerable groups. Excellent partnerships exist with a range of appropriate agencies and teams work very well together to ensure coherent support and intervention. The centre is well resourced and space is used flexibly for different purposes both in the centre and at other venues, including a room in the neighbouring school.

The centre is welcoming to all and there is good attention to reducing barriers, particularly those caused by poverty. By promoting awareness and access to the Free 4 Two scheme, the centre has ensured that a relatively high number of children are now accessing nursery provision and making good progress. Diversity is celebrated through events and activities and there is a good range of resources to support provision for children with different needs, backgrounds and interests. The centre is alert to the isolation that might be experienced by the very small number of families from cultures other than White British and has set up specific activities for this group, such as English courses and Chatter Play groups for parents and children. Activities are designed to enable different groups to learn and socialise together and in this way the centre is increasing social cohesion.

Policies, training and practice to ensure the safety of children and adults are exceptionally thorough and implemented rigorously and regularly, for example health and safety and safeguarding are discussed at all team meetings. Child protection and Common Assessment Framework procedures are used very well and there is regular communication and cooperation with social services and health colleagues to ensure that children and families are well supported.

These are the grades for leadership and management

<b>The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day-to-day management arrangements are clear and understood</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secure improvement in outcomes</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services provided by the centre to</b>	<b>1</b>

<b>meet its core purpose</b>	
<b>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</b>	<b>2</b>

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

None.

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## **Summary for centre users**

We inspected the Meadow Children's Centre on 16 and 17 May 2012. We judged the centre as good overall.

We would like to thank all of you who spoke to us during the inspection. Many of you went out of your way to tell us how important the centre is to you, what a difference going there has made to you and how much you value the activities provided. We found that the centre staff know their families very well and they have built up excellent partnerships, for example with health colleagues, the local housing trust, social services and Jobcentre Plus, to make sure that they are providing the right sort of activities and supporting the families who need the most help.

You feel welcome in the centre and trust the staff. The centre staff take the safety and well-being of families extremely seriously and this is important because for some of you the centre is a safe haven where you have received important help at very difficult times. You are routinely asked for your feedback and ideas and the centre takes these very seriously; as a result, you know that what you say really matters and makes a difference.

Many of the different groups and activities have a strong focus on the health and safety of families and the positive impact of these can be seen in the rapid improvement in aspects such as child obesity, breastfeeding rates and accidents to children in your local area. We saw from your feedback, and from what you told us, that these activities are helping you to develop a better understanding of healthy lifestyles. The centre works closely with health and social services to make sure that families in crisis, and where children are at risk, get valuable support and children are safer as a result of this. Because many of you don't have gardens or safe places for the children to play outside, the centre organises some activities such as the toddler group in the church hall and the summer walks. The centre itself doesn't

have a lot of outside space but we have asked them to try to plan some more regular opportunities for children to run, jump and play outside.

We saw how much the children in the different groups liked exploring the interesting activities and resources. The centre is focusing on developing children's speaking and listening skills in all the different groups as well as in activities like the Breakfast and Books sessions, which also help them to get ready for school. These well-planned and well-organised activities mean that children make good progress, often from low starting points. The centre is particularly good at helping children with special needs. This is helped by being able to get specialised support such as speech and language input and one parent said that it was 'a real boost' being able to access it in the centre.

Your feedback on courses such as Learning Links shows how you learn about managing behaviour and how important play is for children. You also said the groups help you make friends and meet people. Many of you have also completed other courses, such as the ones we saw during the inspection on numeracy and English for speakers of other languages. Some of you have trained as volunteers such as Breast Buddies, and this means that you make a good contribution to the life of the centre as well as developing skills that help when you want to find paid work.

Senior leaders are strongly focused on improving the lives of children and families in the area and everyone in the centre agrees with that core purpose. They work extremely well with all sorts of partners so that you get the right support from the right people. This means that the centre provides excellent value for money. There is clear management and accountability at various levels from Advisory Board, Steering Group, Parents' Forum and centre team meetings. It is clear that the lives of individual children and families are improved by the work of the centre. However, at the moment, self-evaluation and targets for improvement are not sharply focused on the impact the centre's work has on families' lives, so we have asked the team to tighten up this further. Nevertheless, the centre has a successful track record and this shows that it has good capacity to improve further.

The full report is available from your centre or on our website: [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk).