

Inspection report for MAL2 Maldon Children's Centre

Local authority	Essex
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Date of previous inspection	N/A
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Linked school if applicable	N/A
Linked early years and childcare if applicable	N/A

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Introduction

The inspection addresses the centre's contribution to:

- facilitating access to early childhood services by parents, prospective parents and young children
- maximising the benefit of those services to parents, prospective parents and young children
- improving the well-being of young children.

The report is made to the local authority and a copy is sent to the children's centre. The local authority may send the report to such persons it considers appropriate and must arrange for an action plan to be produced in relation to the findings in this report.

This inspection was carried out by an additional inspector and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with centre and cluster managers and centre staff and representatives from partner organisations including health and education. They also met parents, a manager from the local authority and senior managers from 4children. They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

MAL2 Maldon Children's Centre is a phase two centre in mid-Essex that was established in 2007. The main base of the centre is in the town centre library. However, most services are delivered from a range of community-based locations such as church or village halls. The centre is linked to two other centres within the same cluster. The centre was previously managed by the Pre-School Learning Alliance but in April 2012, the 4Children charity commenced managing the centre on behalf of the local authority. Governance is provided by a partnership group which acts as an advisory board. The centre meets its core purpose. Services offered include early years education, health services, adult learning provision, outreach services and family support.

The reach area has high levels of deprivation in some parts and high levels of affluence in other parts. Within the area, 15 super output areas (SOAs) cover the town of Maldon and the attached villages of Heybridge and Heybridge Basin. Three of these SOA's are ranked within the 20% most deprived areas of the county. They are the highest ranking areas of deprivation in Maldon District for unemployment, low income and overall level of deprivation. The most recent data indicate that 1260 children under five live within the reach area. Of these, about 20% of children live in out-of-work households dependent on benefits and 16% of children across the reach area are classed as living in poverty.

Most families are of White British heritage but a small percentage are from minority ethnic groups. The level of children’s skills, knowledge and abilities on entry to early years provision varies between being below what is expected for their age and being in line with expectations.

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

Maldon Children’s Centre is a good centre which provides good quality and well-integrated provision for families. In April 2012, responsibility for management of the centre passed to the 4Children charity. Since then, improvements have been made to service delivery and also to the way outcomes are measured. Governance arrangements are secure. External organisations that work with the centre, are well represented on the new partnership group which acts as an advisory board. However, representation of parents on the group is limited and their contribution to governance is not readily apparent.

The centre has limited accommodation in the library where it is based. However, it works well with a wide range of partners to provide services from a variety of locations in the reach area. Overall partnership work is effective in helping the centre to meet its core purpose.

Support arrangements for families are good. The team that provides support, care and guidance is highly respected by other agencies and parents. Families receive good quality guidance and help to overcome problems that could inhibit their progress and their children’s development. Families feel safe and the centre promotes safeguarding and safety well.

The centre has been particularly successful in building good relationships with families from the traveller community. As a result, their access to and enjoyment of educational opportunities has increased. Other evidence such as increasing participation rates of minority ethnic groups demonstrates the centre’s strong commitment to promoting equality.

Positive health outcomes are actively promoted and health provision is responsive to local priorities which currently are around emotional and mental health. The educational achievement of children as shown in Early Years Foundation Stage profile results is good. Through effective partnership work with early years providers and schools, the centre contributes well to children's education and their transition to school.

Activities for adults are also well planned to promote their learning. Parents comment on the progress they have made as a result of participating in centre activities. As one parent commented about a parenting course, 'It makes you reflect on what you do and your reactions to your child's behaviour.'

Worklessness rates are high in some parts of the reach area. The centre recognises that more work has to be done to connect with families in these parts and to promote economic stability and independence for these and other families.

Overall, self-evaluation and monitoring of provision are rigorous and thorough processes. They involve detailed analysis of data and comprehensive evaluations of the quality and impact of services. However, the local authority's annual review process does not yet provide sufficient challenge to the centre.

Taking into account the overall good quality of performance management and evaluation, the good quality leadership and management and the proven effectiveness to date of the centre's improvement planning, its capacity for sustained improvement is good.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Strengthen provision to ensure greater promotion of economic stability and independence for families, particularly in parts of the reach area where worklessness rates are high.
- Increase the representation of parents from a range of target groups on the partnership group to ensure they have good and regular opportunities to contribute to governance.
- Ensure that the local authority strengthens the annual review process to provide rigorous and robust challenge to the centre

How good are outcomes for families?

2

Overall outcomes for families are good. Many families benefit from the good range of health provision offered by the centre. Data show that obesity rates in the reach area are low. Although healthy living programmes are promoted to ensure these rates

remain low, the centre responds well to key health priorities for the reach area such as emotional health. One member of staff specialises in providing intervention and support for families where emotional or mental health needs have been identified. Breastfeeding rates at six to eight weeks are low but improving. Good quality guidance on breastfeeding is provided through group support sessions and individual guidance. Through effective partnership work with health services, pregnant women and their partners also benefit from a good quality four-week antenatal programme. 'It covered lots of the worries we had and gave us a chance to talk about them' was the comment from one parent and was typical of many other comments.

Families feel safe at the centre and at other venues used to provide services. Safeguarding is actively promoted. Centre staff work effectively with social care professionals to respond in a timely manner to safeguarding concerns. In addition, they use the Common Assessment Framework effectively to assess families' needs. The number of children subject to child protection plans is low. However, the centre works productively with a range of professionals to provide support for these children. Evidence-based parenting programmes help parents, particularly lone parents and those whose circumstances make them vulnerable, understand how to keep their families safe.

The most recent data show that 70% of children have achieved 78 points across the Early Years Foundation Stage profile. The centre contributes well to this good achievement through direct provision and also through work to support childminders and pre-schools. 'I have seen her pretend play develop and being involved in groups has improved her talking': this comment from one parent illustrates the benefits to children who attend the centre. Evaluations from parents also confirm that children's skills for the future improve as a result of their participation in centre activities. Adults make good progress in developing their learning and skills. They participate well in a range of adult learning activities such as first aid training and 'healthy living' courses.

Children behave well at the centre and parents report that their behaviour has improved as a result of their attendance. Parents are regularly consulted about services and routinely contribute views and good ideas for improvement through the parents' forum. There is some limited parental representation on the newly constituted partnership group which acts as an advisory board. However, the centre is not able to fully demonstrate how parents make a significant contribution to key decision making at governance level.

Provision for parents seeking guidance and advice about employment and other aspects of economic stability is satisfactory. The centre has recently established links with an external adult training and guidance provider. This has enhanced the services that are available for parents seeking employment. A few parents have already benefited from guidance provided but it is too soon for longer term impact to be measured. Through good quality guidance and information they have received from centre staff, other parents have received increased statutory benefits and help to access two-year-old funding.

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

Centre staff routinely analyse data to assess needs and to monitor participation rates of key target groups such as minority ethnic groups, fathers and families from workless households. Data show that overall participation rates are good and that the centre is successfully increasing participation across all target groups. Services are well matched to local priorities and also reflect the interests and needs of parents. Centre staff also use local intelligence and partnership links to ensure key priorities of families are being met. Because of its location in a library and in the centre of a town, centre staff prioritise outreach work. They make good use a range of community venues such as village halls and church halls to ensure a fair distribution of provision across the reach area. They also use home visits effectively to meet the needs of families whose circumstances make them vulnerable or who for various reasons cannot attend the centre.

The quality of provision for children to learn and develop their skills is good. Activities are well planned to ensure learning is purposeful and linked to Early Years Foundation Stage guidance. Support is also given to childminders to help improve their capacity to provide good quality learning opportunities for children. Sessions observed during the inspection showed that good quality resources and effective planning were used by staff to help children explore and develop their language skills. Provision for adult learning is also purposeful and helps parents to develop knowledge and skills. For example, parents comment positively about the benefits they receive from learning about baby massage.

'Centre staff don't tell you what to do, they help you work through things': this comment from a parent illustrates well the good quality of support and care that are provided to families. Centre staff do not pretend that they can resolve all issues for

families. Instead, they focus their energies on helping parents to find solutions to problems or to develop coping skills to live with circumstances that cannot be changed. The centre's support and outreach worker team is highly skilled and trusted by families and partners. As a result of the sensitive support they receive, families have been able to cope confidently with emotionally difficult circumstances such as bereavement or fear of domestic violence.

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

Good quality leadership and management have enabled the centre to deal effectively with changes at management level and to operational systems. Governance arrangements are secure and lines of accountability are clearly defined. At all levels, staff have a good understanding of their roles and responsibilities.

Overall self-evaluation is effective and the centre recognises its strengths and areas for improvement. Data are used well to monitor impact and participation of target groups. Families routinely contribute well to the evaluation process. Performance management is carried out well by managers at different levels of seniority within the 4Children structure and within the local authority. Measureable targets and key performance indicators are used to drive improvement. However, the local authority's annual review process and the report that emerges at the end of this, does not provide sufficient challenge to the centre.

Resources are well used and the increasing participation rates of all key target groups such as minority ethnic groups and lone parents are testimony to the effectiveness of the centre. Staff from partner organisations that work with the centre and parents are very satisfied with the service they receive from the centre. Resources and accommodation including those provided by external organisations, contribute well to the range and location of provision. However, centre staff and the partner organisations they work with, are aware of the need to develop more targeted provision in the Heybridge part of the area.

The centre works extensively and effectively with a range of organisations from across the voluntary and statutory sector. Work with these partners is mutually beneficial. For example, partnership work with the library where the centre is based, has provided good opportunities for children to participate in activities that link learning with literacy.

Data show that the achievement gap between children in the bottom 20% across the Early Years Foundation Stage profile and the rest is narrowing. The centre promotes inclusion and equality effectively. The centre manager has designated responsibility for equality and monitors the impact of the centre's equality strategies. Work with members of a small local travelling community has been particularly successful in breaking down barriers. The centre has been instrumental in creating trust between families from the community and statutory agencies. Support for disabled children and those who have special educational needs and their families is also good.

Safeguarding and safer recruitment arrangements are effective and statutory requirements are well met. Policies to promote safety for children, vulnerable adults and for staff are comprehensive. Appropriate recruitment and Criminal Record Bureau checks are carried out on prospective staff and volunteers. Risk assessments are thorough and carried out for all activities and venues. A designated member of staff has lead responsibility for monitoring the effectiveness of safeguarding practice, particularly in relation to family support work. This ensures that safeguarding practice is of a high standard. Multi-agency work is effective and the system of referrals both to and from the centre is very effective. Through direct support and also signposting to specialist agencies, safeguarding of families affected by domestic violence is actively promoted.

Centre staff listen to parents and value their views. This is why staff regularly consult families through questionnaires, evaluations and also the parents' forum. User engagement is, therefore, good. Outreach work is also productive. The centre seeks out the views of the wider community and, for example, used links with pre-schools to carry out a survey into the needs and interests of the community.

These are the grades for leadership and management

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

<p>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</p>	<p>2</p>
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Any other information used to inform the judgements made during this inspection

None

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

Summary for centre users

We inspected MAL2 Maldon Children's Centre on 10–11 October 2012. We judged the centre as good overall.

Many thanks to those of you who gave up your time to speak to us during the inspection. We appreciate your honesty and openness in talking to us about how centre staff have helped you through some difficult times. One of the real strengths of the centre is the good quality support and care that is offered to families. Staff work very hard to support families. Behind the scenes, they also work well with a whole range of other organisations to make sure you receive the most appropriate type of support and guidance.

During our visit, we were able to observe some of the activities you and your children enjoy at the centre. We could see that the quality of services provided to families is good. You also told us how much you and your children enjoy attending the centre. Some of you gave us examples of how since they started attending the centre, your children’s social and communication skills have improved.

You also told us that you and your families feel safe at the centre. Safety of families is something that staff take very seriously. Through work that you cannot often see, staff work hard to make sure families are safeguarded. Staff are also conscientious in ensuring families from all sorts of backgrounds feel safe and welcome at the centre.

We also know from your evaluations, that many of you have improved your knowledge as a result of attending sessions such as baby massage or first aid training. During our visit, we looked at lots of statistics and these also indicate that your centre is making good progress. More and more families from a range of backgrounds are now involved in activities with the centre.

In these economically difficult times, one aspect of your centre’s services that we found could be better is the services that are available for parents seeking

employment or training. This is why we have asked the centre to look at ways of helping families to become more economically stable.

Over the last few years, the educational achievement of children in your community has improved. Your centre contributes towards this achievement well with activities that are organised for families. Staff also promote positive outcomes for children by supporting childminders or other professionals who are involved in children's development and education.

We know that you contribute well to the running of the centre through your evaluations and also by expressing your views through the parents' forum. However, we have asked the centre to get more of you involved in its governance. Your involvement at this level will enhance the quality of services that are delivered to families. We have also asked the local authority to strengthen the way it reviews the performance of the centre. This will improve the existing systems that are used to monitor the quality of the services provided.

Once again, many thanks for contributing to the inspection process. We wish you and your families all the best for the future.

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