

Inspection report for Meredith Children's Centre

Local authority	Suffolk County Council
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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	Not applicable

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 an additional inspector and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with senior leaders, a range of partners, advisory board members, local authority representatives, childminders, parents and grandparents.

They also observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation including the self-evaluation form, service implementation plan and the local authority annual report.

Information about the centre

Meredith Children's Centre is a phase two centre which opened in 2008 and meets its full core purpose. The centre shares a building with Whitton Clinic which is located to the south-west of Ipswich town. Services are delivered from the centre and at five other locations across the reach area.

There are 755 children aged under five years living in the reach area. The large majority (71%) of families are of White British heritage and a wide range of minority ethnic groups, including Traveller families, also live in the area. Families live in a mix of social, privately rented and owner-occupied housing. There is no data available about the proportion of children living in workless households. Some 11% of families are in receipt of Working Tax Credit. Children's skills, knowledge and abilities when they enter early years provision are typically below the level expected for their age.

The centre was without a substantive manager last year while the post holder was on maternity leave. The manager returned in May and now shares the management role of Meredith and another children's centre with a colleague; they both work two and a half days a week. The partner centre, Wellington Children's Centre, is subject to a separate inspection. A partnership advisory board provides governance for both children's centres and comprises representatives from partner agencies and parents,

while the county council is the appropriate body. There are six centres in total in the south-west locality and although currently each centre has its own management arrangements, most services are delivered through an integrated locality model. An integrated services manager oversees the work of all six 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

The centre meets its core purpose and provides a satisfactory and improving service to local families. Staff have come through a challenging 12 months with strong determination to ensure the centre serves its diverse community well. The centre has a clear focus on promoting equality which is reflected in the good participation in activities from a wide range of families. Nevertheless, a higher proportion of minority ethnic groups, families with disabled children and teenage parents are involved than lone parents or families from workless homes. Families say the centre is, 'inclusive', 'welcoming' and 'friendly to everyone no matter who they are, or where they come from'.

Managers provide a clear sense of direction. They have their fingers firmly 'on the pulse' of the centre and are working with a sensible number of priorities that are focused on the things that matter most. However, written self-evaluation is descriptive rather than analytical and action planning lacks measurable targets and clear timescales. These features mean that the centre has a satisfactory rather than good capacity to improve its effectiveness.

Outcomes are currently satisfactory overall with two aspects that are good. Children are safe and well protected because their welfare concerns are identified quickly and positive steps are taken to tackle them through well-coordinated partnership work. Good quality support and advice helps families to develop a good understanding of dangers and how to keep themselves safe. For example, those who take part in positive parenting courses identify how much their confidence builds and how empowered they are to take control of their lives. Parents are keen to share how the centre has helped them to feel less isolated and make changes in their lives. 'I would be lost without the centre, the staff feel like friends and the place is like home' and 'Staff are so subtle in their approach, the right people at the right time are there to

help you – they are like someone holding me up in the shadows’ are comments typical of many. Parents have a strong voice in helping to shape services and are enabled to make a good contribution to the life and development of the centre including through their active involvement in governance.

Satisfactory learning and development opportunities underpin children’s and adults’ sound educational achievements. Children make steady progress from their starting points and data from early years settings, predominantly local schools, shows that over time the proportion of children reaching a good level of development is rising, although still below the national average. Last year, the gap between the lowest achieving 20% of children and the rest widened slightly. At 31.1%, it is wider than the Suffolk average but slightly narrower than the gap seen nationally.

Some parents benefit from the good advice they get about managing debts and securing the benefits for which they are eligible. There is strong evidence to show how effective partnership work is in improving families’ financial stability. Adults attend courses geared towards improving their employability skills and a few gain from a range of work experiences from volunteering at the centre. However, the centre is not yet tracking the longer-term benefits for children when they move to the next stage in their learning or when adults access further learning opportunities.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Extend the analysis and use of data to plan future services that will better meet local needs, particularly those of lone parents and families from workless homes.
- Develop a consistent method for tracking the progress of children by:
 - working with schools to see how well those who access children’s centre services achieve relative to their peers
 - working with education and training partners to follow up how well adults signposted to services build skills for the future.
- Sharpen written self-evaluation and action planning to enable rigorous monitoring by:
 - using data to analyse what impact actions have on improving outcomes
 - ensuring target setting is not only challenging but sets a brisk pace to future improvement
 - establishing clear milestones and appropriate timescales which can help leaders to measure progress towards achieving priorities more robustly.

How good are outcomes for families?

3

Families are helped to live healthier lives by participating in activities that raise their

awareness about the benefit of a good diet and regular exercise, and by eating the fruit freely available at the centre. The level of obesity in the reach area is reducing but at 9.9% is still above the national average. The positive impact of breastfeeding on children's healthy weights is given a high profile in the centre, and through the 'Honeysucklers' group quite a few new mothers, including teenage mothers, are given good support and sustain breastfeeding for over eight weeks. At 40%, the overall proportion is below the level seen nationally and the centre is working actively with health partners to close the gap.

High regard is given to promoting safety and, as a result, children and families feel safe when accessing services. Staff initiate Common Assessment Framework (CAF) referrals effectively to ensure families receive the most appropriate level of support and timely intervention. Good partnership working ensures that children subject to child protection plans receive a package of support that not only keeps them safe but enables their learning and development to progress. Parents are building good confidence in their parenting skills including learning safer ways to manage children's behaviour as a result of attending designated courses. One mother's comment is typical, 'It has made me realise that I am not the only one having problems, and through the course I now know what triggers my anxieties and how to overcome them.'

Families are enthusiastic about attending the centre and outreach venues. Children behave well and families show respect for each other. Good relationships are supported through sessions such as 'Fun Start' where children and adults enjoy learning through play such as throwing and rolling a ball to each other which they then take home. This enables children to develop coordination skills, work cooperatively with others and grow as learners who are keen to 'have a go'. Overall, data shows that the number of children in the centre's reach area who achieve a good level of development is increasing steadily. The percentage gap between the lowest achieving 20% of children widened last year. The centre has plans to work with a local school to help boys build good communication skills and to extend its 'Nought to walkers' group to include the over twos. Initial tracking of children who move into two local primary school shows that some make good progress but robust systems to track the longer-term achievements of children when they move to early years settings or schools are not yet in place.

Parents are very clear that their engagement with the centre has improved their confidence and independence, which in turn has led to a better quality of life. Parents share their views readily with staff at coffee mornings and the centre responds by displaying how they take good ideas and use them to inform service delivery on the 'What you've said - what we did' board in reception. Parents play a key role in the governance arrangements and sit on the partnership advisory board. The current chair is a mother from the neighbourhood. Parents show enterprising behaviour when they organise fundraising events to ensure some activities such as handling reptiles are delivered during the six-week school holidays and include older siblings.

The centre signposts families to the Family Inclusion Service for information on benefits, debt counselling and tax credits and this year a gain of almost £100,000 has resulted in some families improving their financial health. Training courses, such as English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), are available for parents and there are a few examples of parents training as community parent volunteers and gaining City and Guilds level two accreditations. A handful access basic skills courses and some vocational courses which result in paid work. However, the centre is not routinely following up adults' longer-term achievements as a result of the work it does to support skills progression and employability.

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	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	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	2
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

Satisfactory provision underpins the satisfactory outcomes with strengths in staff's good care, guidance and support. Together with good partnership work, this helps families keep safe and enables their positive contribution to the life and development of the centre. Outreach work is having a good impact on breaking down barriers, particularly for families at risk. The weekly allocation meetings attended by locality partners are a positive feature and involve the sharing of information so that services are integrated. Bespoke packages, including home visits, are devised to include timely interventions and support for those whose circumstances make them particularly vulnerable so that they are better equipped to get their lives back on track.

Managers have good local knowledge supported by reasonable data provided by the local authority, and increasingly health partners, which they use to inform the planning of activities and services. The centre has registered three quarters of families with young children in the most deprived community and is working effectively to promote community cohesion amongst families from different backgrounds. Their work to promote the good participation of some target groups,

for example teenage parents, is leading to these families living more positive lives. The centre recognises that more work remains to be done to encourage the regular contact of lone parents and those from workless homes. The provision of services in outreach locations such as 'Busy Buddies' means services are taken out to families in their community, therefore, reducing isolation and transport barriers. Childminders say the centre welcomes them warmly and supports them by sharing information about child development and enabling them to use the centre's facilities and equipment. 'They are totally there for us' is a typical comment.

The centre promotes purposeful learning satisfactorily through generally well-planned sessions that families enjoy immensely as demonstrated by their positive evaluations. Children gain from a range of experiences and some beautiful resources that have been carefully chosen to stimulate their learning and development from an early age. Opportunities are sometimes missed to chart individual progress and to use the findings from one activity to inform the planning of future activities. There is a similar picture when adults engage in learning which is often meaningful but where assessments are not sufficiently robust to demonstrate impact. There are exceptions. Inspectors' observation of week nine of the 'Freedom' programme saw how positive group interactions are due to the expert skills of family support workers who focus well on meeting individual, as well as group, needs.

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	2

How effective are the leadership and management?

3

Last year was a challenge in many respects due to staffing matters including turnover and absence and the centre being without a substantive manager. Some things inevitably slipped but it is testament to the team's commitment to fulfilling the centre's vision that things were kept on an even keel. Since permanent management was restored six months ago, there has been clear improvement. Staff speak positively about the recognition given to their work with the most vulnerable families and the good quality of supervision which helps them to manage very complex case loads. Safeguarding is given high priority in practice and procedures meet current requirements. There is purpose and clarity to the work of the centre with strong determination to build for greater success. Managers recognise that written plans are not serving them well in their monitoring and that evaluation and target setting need sharpening in order that they can pick up the pace of improvement.

Governance and accountability arrangements are clear and understood. The level of

challenge injected into the partnership advisory board's decision-making is developing. Strong integrated services and key partnerships are firmly established, ensuring that local families are helped to improve their well-being. The centre is developing partnerships with other services, such as early years providers, the voluntary sector and through its links with the panel that is leading a £1 million community regeneration programme to further enhance the achievement and economic well-being of local families. Day-to-day management ensures that the premises are used effectively. Resources, including the deployment of staff and the use of community volunteers, are appropriately managed; in consequence, value for money is satisfactory.

Inclusion is promoted very effectively within the centre. Displays celebrate cultural diversity with a number of signs in community languages. Staff are highly trained and confident in tackling discrimination. Parents say that the centre is welcoming, friendly and inclusive. Families with children with disabilities or special educational needs are well supported. A community day held in the summer involved 155 local families in sharing activities and enjoying being with one another. Parents' views are strongly encouraged through a range of strategies that also involve them receiving regular feedback about how their ideas have been used to help shape services. Engagement levels are currently satisfactory and improving across most target groups.

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	2
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	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 range of provision	3

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

Not applicable

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Meredith Children's Centre on 14 and 15 November 2012. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

During the inspection we held meetings with the centre's staff, some of the other services who work from the centre, members of the local authority and partnership advisory board. We looked at evaluations of the centre's work and a range of other documentation. We were pleased to be able to talk to some of you about the centre and the activities.

The centre has had a tough year with changes in staffing and no permanent manager. It is good to see things getting back on track. We agree with you that staff provide a warm welcome to everyone and ensure that relationships are respectful and racially harmonious. You feel that you receive good levels of care, guidance and support, especially when you need it the most and we agree. It is great to see you taking good practice advice home, for example from parenting courses that help you manage your children's behaviour and combat feelings of anxiety. It was very pleasing to find out about your good involvement in the life and development of the centre.

You were keen to tell us how the centre helps your children to learn. This is confirmed by comments such as, 'The groups are brilliant – my son loves coming and learnt to colour in today at the Sticky Finger session.' We have asked the centre to work with other early years settings and schools to track how well your children get on when they move to more formal education. Some of you are benefiting considerably from debt and benefits advice and others are accessing training to help build good skills for the future. The centre helps anyone wanting to access further learning opportunities but is not finding out what happens subsequently and so we have asked them to work with partners to establish a consistent method of tracking your achievements.

A growing number of families from the neighbourhood have regular contact with the centre but the number of lone parents or families from workless homes who access services is not yet as high as other groups, such as young parents and families of minority ethnic heritage. We have asked the centre to push on with getting more of these families involved.

Managers are working well together and the staff team is 100% behind their drive for improvement. There are a sensible number of priorities in place to guide the centre's development but written forms and plans are not particularly helpful in setting clear targets and timelines. These features get in the way of ensuring a brisk pace to making things even better and so we have asked managers to revise them and draw on data to help measure the progress they make.

Thank you very much for your contributions to the inspection. Good wishes for the future.

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