

Seashells Children's Centre

Sheerness Children & Families Centre, Rose Street, Sheerness, Kent, ME12 1AW

Inspection date 26–27 September 2013

Overall effectiveness	This inspection:	Good	2
	Previous inspection:	Not previously inspected	
Access to services by young children and families		Good	2
The quality of practice and services		Good	2
The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management		Good	2

Summary of key findings for children and families

This is a good centre.

- This vibrant, welcoming and inclusive centre has registered most of the families with children under five years old living in the reach area, including those in most need. They benefit from good services and quality advice which make a positive difference to their lives.
- The centre is well led and managed. Staff are passionate about improving the life chances of the local community and are committed to improving the opportunities for all families, particularly those it has identified as in greatest need. They know the local community well and are always available to listen to parents' queries and concerns. As one parent commented, 'This is a very friendly centre and management always listens and takes your ideas on board.'
- Effective joint working with health care professional aids the centre's highly effective early actions to secure improvements for families. Families hold the centre in high regard and greatly appreciate the guidance and support on offer. As one parent commented, 'I've had my ups and downs but Seashells has always been there for me.'
- Governance is effective and well established. The local authority, district advisory board and steering group support, monitor and challenge the centre well through its quarterly reviews and the annual conversation. Effective performance management and a well-considered development plan ensure the work of centre continues to improve.

It is not outstanding because:

- Levels of childhood obesity and rates of breastfeeding are too variable; despite the otherwise good work of staff to improve health outcomes for children and their parents, impact in these two areas is limited.
- Relatively few male carers take part in the regular activities of the centre, and the centre leaders recognise that this is an area for improvement.
- The collection of information and checks on monitoring and tracking of progress of children and adults are not fully developed.

Information about this inspection

The inspection of this children's centre was carried out under Part 3A of the Childcare Act 2006 as amended by the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009.

The inspection was carried out by two additional inspectors.

The inspectors held meetings with the centre manager, district manager from the local authority, and partners from health, education, community and the qualified teacher. Visits to activities, such as Chatty Sacks, Baby Massage, an evidence based parenting course and midwife clinic, were undertaken. They also met parents, volunteers and representatives from the steering group, and the Chair and Chief Executive Officer of Children & Families Ltd.

The inspectors looked at the centre's self-evaluation, action planning, a sample of case files, safeguarding procedures and a range of other relevant documentation. Almost all observations were undertaken with centre staff. The centre manager, together with two members of staff and the Chief Executive Officer, attended all meetings of the inspection team.

Inspection team

David Scott, Lead inspector

Additional Inspector

Barbara Saltmarsh

Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about the centre

Seashells Children's Centre was designated in November 2005 as a phase one standalone centre and delivers a range of services to meet the core purpose, including health, parent and toddler groups, crèche services, family support, antenatal services and adult learning. It operates for 51 weeks throughout the year, and is open Monday to Friday 8.30am to 5.30pm. Seashells shares its site with Sheerness Neighbourhood Nursery (URN 543632), and is adjacent to Rose Street Primary School (URN 118348). The centre is managed by Children & Families Ltd on behalf of the local authority. The district advisory board, comprising of key partners and parent representatives, provides strategic leadership and the steering group provides governance.

The centre's reach area includes 1,105 children under five years of age, including a few of whom are from minority ethnic families, predominantly of East European heritage. The centre is situated in one of the most economically disadvantaged wards in Sheppey, with areas of significant deprivation. For example, all children in the reach area live in the top 20% most deprived areas in the country. Information shows that 48% of children live in workless households. The centre has identified lone parents, those from workless households, male carers and breastfeeding mothers as its target groups. Children's skills, knowledge and abilities on entry to early years provision are below the levels expected for their age.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

- Improve health outcomes by:
 - reducing the rate of childhood obesity so that it is closer to those levels seen nationally
 - increasing the proportion of mothers breastfeeding at six to eight weeks so that it is closer to those levels seen nationally.
- Increase the number of male carers who regularly attend the centre or use its services.
- Rigorously collect, check and analyse the progress of individual children and adults so that the centre has a very clear view of the progress made to help shape future activities.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Good

- The centre provides a very welcoming and friendly environment for children and parents who benefit from the range of activities available. Links with health professionals are particularly strong. Every family with a newborn baby receives a visit within 28 days of the birth. This helps to promote the very positive engagement of families, so that over 75% of children living in the most deprived neighbourhoods and those from workless households regularly access services.
- At 96%, lone parents engage particularly well with the centre. However, at 59%, the proportion of male carers who regularly attend services is lower than other users. The centre is sensitive to the needs of families who are in most need and does all it can to help them stay safe. Parents' awareness about health and safety in their homes is raised through the centre's useful practical help and advice and, as a result, the parents have become more self-assured and confident in managing risks. The work of the centre makes a strong contribution to keeping families safe through its home visits and first-aid courses for both staff and parents.

- The centre's information shows that over 95% of eligible two-year-old children take up their free entitlement to early years education. This is helping to close the learning gaps between the lowest achieving 20% of children and the rest, and helping to prepare them for school. Parents improve their parenting skills by attending activities such as Magnifying Minds and the health trainer drop-ins.
- Daddy Cool runs every Saturday and is much enjoyed by those who attend and get involved in a range of popular events, such as sports day and carnival with their children. Themed sessions are organised throughout the year, such as the building and planting of the Children's Community Garden, in order to improve children's understanding of how fruit and vegetables are grown and the benefits of eating fresh produce.

The quality of practice and services

Good

- The centre delivers a good balance of relevant universal and targeted services. Various initiatives, such as Make and Munch and the Community Chef programme, together with fitness activities such as Aquatots and Seashells strolls, have been designed to give families practical tips and advice on how to lead a more healthy lifestyle. However, centre leaders rightly recognise that these activities have only had a limited impact in reducing levels of childhood obesity which, at 12.1%, are above levels seen nationally.
- Almost two thirds of children achieve a good level of development by the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage, which is below that found across the county but above that seen nationally. The centre's work to promote early learning is good and centre staff prepare children well to start school, so that they are not disadvantaged and settle in well.
- The centre's strong emphasis on adopting a healthy lifestyle has produced some positive health outcomes for families in most need. Attendance at antenatal and baby clinics is high and has a positive effect in promoting parents' good understanding of child health and development.
- The centre actively promotes the benefits of new mothers initiating breastfeeding through specific workshops and there are good levels of childhood immunisation. However, the impact of these measures has been limited, resulting in a static trend over time. The proportion of mothers continuing to breastfeed at six to eight weeks is well below levels seen nationally. The centre manager and staff have correctly identified this as an area for improvement.
- The centre successfully engages with the majority of its key target groups to help them overcome personal challenges in their lives. Domestic violence is a particular issue in the area and, as a result of staff expertise, women experiencing domestic violence can safely access the activities and receive timely and effective support.
- Adult learning courses and referral for employment and family finance advice help to improve the financial stability for the majority of families. The centre's records indicate that almost all have either gained employment or have undertaken training in readiness for work. Additionally, families are helped in times of crisis by being given food boxes from the Family Food Bank, based at the centre.
- Staff have been particularly successful in creating opportunities for volunteers. For example, over the past five years, 30 users have signed up to be trained to be breastfeeding peer support volunteers. As a result, a third of these mothers proceeded into health or midwifery-related work, with two thirds going on to further education or other employment.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

Good

- The centre is well led and managed by skilled staff who are passionate about their work. Despite recent staffing uncertainties, team spirit is high and staff are well motivated. They feel valued and well supported in their roles and share a strong commitment to do the best for the community. The centre runs smoothly and day-to-day management is effective. Good professional supervision and management arrangements are in place to monitor the performance of staff and ensure their safety and well-being and that they are suitably trained.

- The sharing of resources and services with neighbouring centres enables highly efficient use of available funds in order to meet the needs of young children and their families. Parents and their children also appreciate the quality of resources, such as those in the recently re-launched toy library. A three year old child commented, 'I like pirates and there is a lot in my bag about pirates.'
- Governance and accountability arrangements are clear. The steering group and district advisory board are made up of a range of community members, centre users and partners who appropriately support and challenge the centre. They have a firm grasp of what is happening in the centre and understand how effectively the centre is reducing the inequalities of different groups in the area.
- Key partners, parents and leaders meet regularly, including the annual conversation to review and agree action plans which include clear targets in the development plan to ensure the continuing success of the centre. The local authority has high expectations for the centre and makes regular checks on its performance. However, although links with the local authority data team are improving they are not yet fully developed. As a result, the collection and analysis of data by centre staff, to check the full impact of the centre's actions on improving the lives of targeted families, are not as effective as they could be.
- Staff use the Common Assessment Framework, well to assess families' needs and use the Team Around the Family meetings to intervene early, coordinate support and prevent issues escalating. Children who are subject to child protection plans, those deemed to be children in need and looked after children are supported well through close working with children's social care services. The centre's safeguarding arrangements are thorough. Successful multi-agency working between key agencies ensures that child protection concerns are swiftly acted upon.

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	Practice consistently reflects the highest aspirations for children and their families and as a result inequalities are reducing rapidly and gaps are closing.
Grade 2	Good	Practice enables most children and their families to access good quality services that improve children's wellbeing and achieve the stated outcomes for families.
Grade 3	Requires improvement	Performance is not as good as it might reasonably be expected to be in one or more key areas.
Grade 4	Inadequate	The needs of children and families in its area are not being met and/or the leaders and managers are not providing sufficient challenge to bring about improvement to the quality of services.

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Managed by	The Children's Centre Manager for Children & Families Ltd on behalf of the local authority

Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	1105
Centre leader	Pat Bacon
Date of previous inspection	N/A
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