

Sheppey 2 - Ladybird and Lilypad Children's Centre Group

c/o Ladybird Children's Centre, First Avenue, Queenborough ME11 5JF

Inspection date

20–21 November 2013

Overall effectiveness	This inspection:	Requires improvement	3
	Previous inspection:		
		Not previously inspected	
Access to services by young children and families		Requires improvement	3
The quality of practice and services		Requires improvement	3
The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management		Requires improvement	3

Summary of key findings for children and families

This children's centre group requires improvement. It is not good because:

- Too many changes in the management arrangements over the last year, and the temporary closure of the Lilypad centre, have impacted on the quality and range of services available to families.
- The advisory board and managers at the local authority do not help the centres to improve at a faster rate. Targets for ongoing improvement are not always reviewed quickly enough.
- Systems for the centres to evidence the long term impact of their work with families over time are still at an early stage.
- Partnerships with some local schools are not yet fully developed.
- Some crèche services do not sufficiently plan for each child's learning needs. Opportunities to extend children's learning outside are not explored fully at the Beaches centre.
- Too few parents have been supported back into training and employment.

This children's centre group has the following strengths:

- The newly appointed network manager has a very good understanding of the changes which need to be made to bring about rapid improvement. She has clearly identified issues within the centres which need improving and has already put comprehensive plans in place to address these.
- The staff who work at the centres are extremely dedicated and are fully committed to helping local families. They have worked tirelessly over the last year to overcome difficulties and ensure families continue to benefit from as many services as possible.
- The families who use the centres recognise the positive impact it has on helping them become more confident parents. They consider the centres to be 'at the heart' of their communities and describe the services as 'a lifeline'.

Information about this inspection

The inspection of this children's centre group was carried out under Part 3A of the Childcare Act 2006 as amended by the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009. The centres that form part of this children's centre group are Ladybird Children's Centre and Lilypad Children's Centre. The Beaches Children's Centre is linked to Lilypad.

This inspection was carried out by two of Her Majesty's Inspectors and two additional inspectors.

The inspectors held meetings with local authority managers, representatives from the district advisory board and parent forum, centre staff, health visitors and midwives, managers from local early years settings and representatives from a range of partner agencies.

The inspectors visited a range of services and activity sessions held at both Ladybird and Beaches Children's Centres.

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

Inspection team

Jo Caswell	Her Majesty's Inspector, Lead Inspector
Harmesh Manghra	Her Majesty's Inspector
Joan Lindsay	Additional Inspector
Ann Janssen	Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about the group

Ladybird Children's Centre and Lilypad Children's Centre form the Sheppey 2 group of children's centres. The Beaches Children's Centre is linked to Lilypad. All three centres are managed by a network manager on behalf of the local authority. At the time of inspection, the network manager had only been in post for five weeks. Over the last year there has been a significant change in the centre management arrangements at all three centres. The local authority provides the governance arrangements through a district advisory board. The Lilypad centre building has been temporarily closed for the last 12 months due to flood damage, but some services continue to operate in community venues. The centres are approximately nine miles apart and cover the Minster, Queenborough, Eastchurch and Leysdown areas of the Isle of Sheppey in Kent. All centres are designated as phase two centres and open on a full-time basis, from Monday to Friday, throughout the year. The centres provide the full core offer of services, including health provision, adult learning, parenting courses, family support, universal play sessions and specialist services, such as speech and language provision.

There are approximately 1,353 children aged under five years living in the communities served by the centres. Ladybird and Lilypad Children's Centres are based in communities ranked within the 70% most deprived areas of the country. There are large rural areas where social isolation is an issue for some families due to limited public transport provision and high levels of unemployment. The population is transient and there are a number of small settled Traveller communities. The Swale district has the second highest level of deprivation in Kent. The larger towns of Minster and Queenborough are densely populated with higher levels of deprivation and a large proportion of social housing and unemployment. Around 31% of children live in households dependent on workless benefits. The majority of children enter early years and school provision with skills below, or significantly below, those expected for their age. Most families living within the area are of White British heritage, although there are an increasing number of families from minority ethnic groups.

What does the group need to do to improve further?

- Leaders, managers and those responsible for governance should ensure that systems to monitor and track the impact of the centres' work are fully embedded by:
 - making full use of all available data to continually set challenging targets and regularly hold the centres' managers to account
 - routinely undertaking a comprehensive needs' analysis of the local communities to ensure all services consistently meet the needs of families living in the area
 - working more closely with all schools to track the progress children make throughout the Early Years Foundation Stage
 - developing more robust systems to demonstrate the long-term impact of the centres' work on all target families.
- Improve the delivery and impact of services delivered from the centre by:
 - ensuring the centres' managers have all available resources to deliver services which have maximum impact and target those most in need
 - reinstating provision within the Lilypad community to ensure all services resume.
- Reduce the number of parents claiming out-of-work benefits by providing relevant training, progression programmes and careers advice to help parents access employment.
- Improve the delivery of activities to support children's learning by:
 - ensuring all centre services are of consistently high quality and challenge all children's development, including making improved use of the outside area at the Beaches centre
 - ensuring that all children start school with the relevant skills, knowledge and abilities typical for their age.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Requires improvement

- Registration rates at all three centres have historically been improving and are currently at 67%. Of these, 82% of families regularly access services and these families represent all main priority groups living in the communities served by the centres. However, the temporary closure last year of the Lilypad centre, and the reduction in services, has led to a slight drop in attendance levels at groups due to the limited transport arrangements. Although staff have sought many creative solutions to deliver services within the community, the lack of permanent space has inhibited the range of provision available.
- Strong partnerships with a range of services ensure parents-to-be have good access to ante-natal care. Midwives work very successfully with centre staff and health visitors to ensure parents benefit from services from the ante-natal stage of pregnancy and continue attending groups following the birth of their babies. Many parents praised the baby groups in helping them to bond with their babies and understand important issues such as weaning.
- Staff work tirelessly with parents to understand their needs and signpost them to relevant services. This means some of the most vulnerable families, including those experiencing domestic abuse and post-natal depression, access services easily and promptly and this has very positive consequences on family well-being.
- Generally, the centre sustains contact with all priority family groups and staff are proactive in adapting services to meet changing need. For example, staff have recognised there is a slight reduction in the number of fathers regularly accessing services and targeted plans have already been put in place with a neighbouring centre to improve this.

The quality of practice and services

Requires improvement

- The centres provide a satisfactory range of targeted and universal services. Parents who attend sessions receive good support and this has a positive impact on their health and well-being. Particularly good support is given to parents suffering from post-natal depression, domestic abuse and feelings of isolation. Some parents undertake courses to help build their confidence and improve their self-esteem. One parent expressed the view of many by telling inspectors, 'I would be lost without the centre.' Health professionals endorsed this comment and described the centre as, 'a God-send to vulnerable parents.'
- The quality of early years provision provided through centre activities is variable. Some activities are very good and help parents clearly understand how to support their children's learning at home. However, some crèche staff lack training and experience in planning for the Early Years Foundation Stage. This has an impact on the quality of some crèche services.
- A good number of parents benefit from courses and groups to help support family well-being. For example, parents told inspectors how completing courses in paediatric first aid, puppet making, baby massage and managing children's behaviour had improved their parenting skills.
- The volunteer programme is developing and a small number of parents have been successful in accessing college and university courses. However, not all parents have been able to access progression courses and support in applying for employment.
- Many parents praised the 'Community Chef' programme in helping them to understand how to prepare nutritious meals on a budget. One parent was so inspired by this course, he now volunteers at the centre and has helped develop the outside area at Ladybirds to grow fresh fruit and vegetables which families use to sample new foods and prepare nutritious meals. This has had a very positive impact on improving children's healthy development. Since 2012, childhood obesity levels have reduced from 17.6% to 13.8% at Ladybird, and from 15.1% to 7.1% at the Lilypad/Beaches centres.
- Staff work very well with other agencies to provide good quality family support. This is particularly effective for those families who cannot access the centre and experience social isolation. Comprehensive work in the local area ensures parents most at risk develop very strong, trusting relationships with the staff. Staff work sensitively with these families and help find solutions to overcome transport difficulties and other barriers which prevent them from attending. Consequently, parents feel more confident and regularly attend services provided at the centre.
- Very well-established links are in place for children starting Queenborough School and Nursery. A transition project is in place helping both children and parents get used to school routines and become familiar with the staff. Parents comment how helpful this programme is and how it helps children settle into the school routine quickly. However, as yet, links with other schools are not fully developed.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

Requires improvement

- The arrangements for leadership, management and governance have been subject to change in the last year. Many short-term managers have been in post and this has resulted in systems not always being fully embedded. Procedures for tracking the long-term impact of the centres' work are still at an early stage. Strategic management has also experienced disruption in the last year and for a period of time, the centres did not have a named district manager. A new district children's centre manager was appointed in August and he has worked tirelessly to understand the needs of the local community and bring about the required improvements to remedy the slippages that started to occur. Together with the appointment of a very strong, dynamic and proactive network manager, and a highly respected new chairperson for the district advisory board, significant improvements are beginning to be seen, although they are still in the early stages.
- Those responsible for governance monitor the centres' work and ensure registration and reach data

consistently cover all priority families. Challenge to performance is carried out through an annual assessment and managers report on each centre's performance at advisory board meetings. Targets are routinely set to enhance performance and the centres' work with the most vulnerable families. However, when the centres have been successful in meeting targets earlier than planned, the centres' action plans have not been reviewed in a timely manner to continue the swift level of improvement.

- The disruption to management has meant that key partnerships with local early years providers and schools are not as well-established as they could be. For example, links have not been made with the school located next door to the Beaches centre. However, partnership arrangements with all other key services are particularly strong and the centres are viewed as an integral part of the local community by partner agencies and stakeholders.
- Some key resources have been removed from the centres. For example, the delivery of the Early Years Foundation Stage is no longer monitored by a qualified teacher. This has led to a short-fall in provision, particularly in crèche services and some universal groups. Parents benefit from the sessions and understand how to play with their children, but the lack of early years expertise impacts on the quality of services provided.
- The centres have established very positive working relationships with other services at both local and strategic level. Data are regularly shared and all partners agree targets and priority improvement areas. This means a good range of professionals work together well and support families most in need. For example, health visitors describe the centres as, 'hubs of communication' and 'important resources'.
- High quality safeguarding arrangements underpin the centres' work. There is particularly good support for children subject to a child protection plan, or those looked after by the local authority. Partnership arrangements between the children's centres and children's services ensure the most vulnerable children, and their carers, are fully supported and have very positive outcomes. Staff carry out comprehensive work in the community ensuring they consistently maintain contact with all vulnerable children made known to them by children's services. The Common Assessment Framework is used particularly well by all staff to ensure all services work together extremely well.
- Parents have a very strong voice within the centres. The Parents' Forum is utilised well to share views and management listen and respond positively when parents contribute ideas for development. The new network manager has been particularly proactive in responding to parents' ideas. For example, she has already improved the provision available for disabled children by changing the 'Something Special' group to a weekly group, rather than a monthly group. This is in response to parents' own requests.

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.

Select details

Unique reference number	80198
Local authority	Kent
Inspection number	424774
Managed by	The local authority
Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	1,353
Centre leader	Sam Higgins
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Telephone number	01795 667615
Email address	Sam.Higgins@kent.gov.uk

This group consists of the following children's centres:

- Ladybird Children's Centre
- Lilypad/Beaches Children's Centres

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