

Sandbach Children's Centre

Sandbach Primary School, Crewe Road, Sandbach, Cheshire, CW11 4NS

Inspection date	11–12 December 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 is a centre that requires improvement. It is not good because:

- The centre has experienced significant change in the three years since it was established, preventing a stronger presence in the community and, consequently, greater success. Staff are still developing an understanding of the needs of the more rural communities and the Middlewich community in particular, following the very recent merger with Middlewich Children's Centre.
- The centre has registered the majority of children in the reach area. However, the withdrawal of live-birth data has challenged the centre's ability to register more families at an early point.
- Some creative strategies have enabled the majority of children from most target groups, and families who reside in the most deprived area or who are particularly vulnerable, to access services. However, only a minority of children is currently engaged with services overall due, in part, to a reduction in staff time and resources.
- The leadership, governance and management of the centre are improving, although they have not been robust. The advisory board is newly formed and the lack of accurate, timely and meaningful data about the full reach population and trends in health and education, hinders leaders' ability to assess needs and target services more effectively. Priorities within plans are appropriate but targets are not used consistently to monitor the performance of the centre with rigour.
- Systems to track the impact of play and learning experiences for children in their early years are still evolving. As a result, the centre is unable to demonstrate fully the difference its activities make towards improving children's readiness for school. Similarly, volunteering opportunities and strategies to promote and track the impact of adult learning and training are still in their infancy.

This children's centre has the following strengths:

- The centre's role in the local authority's early help and intervention strategy is well-developed. As a result, the centre successfully identifies and supports families experiencing significant troubles and crises.
- Parents, some of whom are separated from their children, consistently report that they receive effective guidance and support. These families sustain their engagement with the centre because they develop a strong sense of trust and respect for staff who, they state, give them 'a push in the right direction' when they are not making the progress expected of them.
- Parents, including those from traveller communities, have good opportunities to share their views and to influence and make decisions about services. For example, parent forums have continued through the mergers of centres and there is a regular presence of parents on the advisory board.

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.

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

The inspectors held meetings with the children's centre family service manager, centre staff, including family support workers and administrative staff, and officers from the local authority. They also met with the family support manager from Greenleaves Family Centre, health, education and early years and adult learning partners, parents, and representatives from the locality advisory board. They looked at the centre's view of its own performance, the centre's development plans, a sample of the centre's policies and procedures, a selection of case studies and a range of other relevant documentation. The inspectors visited Greenleaves Family Centre, Alsager Health Centre, the Wych Centre and Alsager Civic Centre to observe various activities. Visits to activities were undertaken jointly with the family service manager. The family service manager attended team meetings along with a representative from the local authority.

Inspection team

Gillian Bishop, Lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Philip Ellwand

Additional inspector

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Additional inspector

Full report

Information about the centre

Sandbach Children's Centre is located on the outskirts of Sandbach in East Cheshire. It is a phase three children's centre, which was designated in 2010. In April 2011, Sandbach Children's Centre and Alsager Children's Centre merged to form one centre. In September 2013 these centres merged again to include Middlewich Children's Centre. All three children's centres now function as one stand-alone centre serving the Sandbach, Alsager and Middlewich communities.

The centre serves a diverse community which includes housing estates which are located in more deprived areas in comparison to other areas which are more affluent. There is one super-output area that is located in one of the 30% most disadvantaged areas in the country. The children's centre adjoins Sandbach Community Primary School, operating from a designated space. Separate inspection arrangements apply to the school and the inspection report can be found at www.ofsted.gov.uk. Outreach services and activities are delivered from buildings in Alsager and Middlewich alongside local medical centres and community venues. The centre's core purpose is provided through a range of integrated services that include health, family support and outreach work.

Approximately 2,560 children aged under five live in the centre's reach area, of which 65% are registered with the centre. Most families are of White British heritage and a very small number represents families from other ethnic groups, including Gypsy, Roma and travellers. Children enter the Early Years Foundation Stage with varied skills and abilities relevant to their age. Centre data show that a very small minority of children in the area lives in workless households. Unemployment in the area is low with 1.65% of adults in Sandbach and Alsager and 2.32% adults in Middlewich out of work.

Sandbach Children's Centre is a local authority run centre. It sits within the Cheshire East South Locality forming part of Cheshire East Family Service (CEFS) and delivering services across the full Continuum of Need for the nought – nineteen age range. The family service manager has responsibility for the day-to-day running of the centre with a team of family support workers and administrative staff. She is line-managed by a locality manager. A newly appointed locality advisory board supports governance arrangements.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

- Improve access to services for young children and families by:
 - using population data more effectively to understand and inform engagement levels across the reach area and support the registration and engagement of more families
 - continuing to raise the profile of the centre and increasing outreach provision to more isolated and rural communities within the reach.
- Improve the quality and impact of practice and services by:
 - developing further provision and tracking for adult training and volunteer opportunities, to improve pathways to work experience, qualifications and/or employment
 - embedding a consistent approach to tracking the progress of children in the Early Years Foundation Stage to demonstrate the impact of the centre’s early childhood services on narrowing the achievement gap between different groups of children and on children’s readiness for school.
- Improve the effectiveness of leadership, governance and management by:
 - improving the collation, interrogation and analysis of data to assess community needs more effectively and to ensure that performance-management procedures are accurately informed
 - improving the centre’s business plan so that all key priorities are grounded in measurable success criteria and contain well-informed targets to improve the accuracy of self-evaluation and the pace of improvement
 - significantly improving access to localised health data, including live-birth data, to enable centre leaders to assess health trends effectively and set specific health targets within their business plan
 - working closely with the local authority to assess the deployment of staff in order to sustain stability and progress for the centre and its community
 - increasing the role and level of challenge of the newly formed locality advisory board during its transition phase.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Requires improvement

- The centre and its activities regularly engage a majority of those families in the most disadvantaged areas and in groups targeted as having the greatest priorities. Overall, in what is a relatively affluent area, a minority of the total child population is engaged fully in the services the centre provides.
- The centre has yet to raise its profile locally and to secure and sustain the active engagement of more children and families in the wider community. However, its ability to do this more quickly is hindered by a reduction in management and staffing, alongside the amount of time the family support workers and managers spend providing services for families and children over the age of five.
- Referral into centre services is managed effectively and swiftly, particularly for children in need, children with disabilities, children on child protection plans and children that are looked after by the local authority. As a result, 100% of all these children are receiving targeted support.
- Data about the local population are not always useful, preventing the centre from capturing accurate information about the engagement of particular groups. For example, the numbers of children under five years who have lone parents are not separated from those children who are over five, and the number of children from traveller families is not totally reliable.
- The centre has developed some creative strategies to secure further registrations and engagement, particularly as it no longer receives notifications of new births. These include some well-established outreach provision, activities for Gypsy, Roma and traveller families and one-off ‘pop-up’ activities and services to extend the centre’s reach into more reluctant communities such as the Radway Estate.

- The centre supports eligible families to take up free entitlement of early education, so that a large majority of three and four year olds benefits, particularly those from target groups.
- The take-up of two-year-old funding is currently low. However, all eligible two-year-olds receiving family support are accessing provision and systems to track the progress of these particular children are in place. The local authority has a planned and phased approach to the delivery of places and tracking for two-year-olds, and this is linked to the children's centre improvement plans.

The quality of practice and services

Requires improvement

- There are some good examples to show how leaders have used data trends and local information from partners to inform their planning and provision. For example, a Ready to Write group has helped to tackle low Early Years Profile scores in literacy and a family drop-in on the Radway Estate provides a flexible but targeted approach to increased engagement where it is known to be low. However, much of the centre's work remains in its infancy which prevents evidence of impact of some of its services.
- Obesity levels across the reach are higher than the local and national averages; as a result, plans are in place to tackle this, alongside the fluctuating trend in breastfeeding at six-to-eight weeks. However, the lack of health data at centre level impedes an accurate analysis of health trends in general and prevents health-specific targets being set against local baseline data.
- Parents and children enjoy a balance of Stay and Play sessions and activities which everybody can attend, such as Together Time and Sensory Time. In addition, activities such as Baby Clinic and the Post-Natal Group provide families with support and advice about their health, maternal care and well-being. However, the quality of commissioned or in-house services such as 'Jiggles and Wiggles' is not routinely monitored, preventing consistently good practice at all times.
- Centre data confirm that children in the Early Years Foundation Stage residing in the area generally achieve a good level of development. However, systems to track children's progress and demonstrate the difference services make are not yet good enough. This prevents the centre demonstrating how the achievement gap between different groups of children who have attended services is being narrowed.
- Adult learning opportunities are evolving but are still at a very early stage. While there is some effective signposting to training providers, such as the Jobcentre Plus and Job Club, the centre does not systematically track the impact for parents who engage. Furthermore, opportunities to volunteer and gain work-related experience are currently limited.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

Requires improvement

- In the relatively short period of time that the centre has been in operation there has been constant changes to the delivery of front-line services.
- Additionally, a large proportion of staff time is now taken up with early help services and targeted support for troubled families with children over the age of five years. This has stretched resources available to children under five years, preventing a more rapid pace of development for the centre.
- The centre is improving because there is evidence that systems to monitor performance more effectively are beginning to develop. Some good partnerships have evolved with the speech and language team, children's social care and some schools, helping to plan and target resources more precisely. However, opportunities to work more closely with the adjoining school are still evolving.
- The newly established locality advisory board has secured regular membership from a wide range of partner agencies such as Jobcentre Plus, schools and health professionals, although its work in holding the centre to account for its performance is still developing and is not yet fully effective.
- The strategic partnership with health is not yet good enough to secure its professionals' active

role in registering more families.

- Available data are not interrogated with rigour, leading to misconceptions about the centre's on-going performance. For example, data are not used effectively to monitor, track and analyse engagement or systematically assess the impact of the centre's work towards reducing inequalities in health, achievement and life chances. Consequently, the centre's self-evaluation is not accurate.
- Arrangements for staff supervision, including case file management and opportunities for professional development, are good. As a result, staff are well-trained, competent in their work and effectively supported now that their work with very vulnerable families has substantially increased.
- Safeguarding procedures are good. Disclosure and Barring Service records are well-kept, visitor arrangements are consistently applied and a robust screening process ensures that appropriate information is gathered and used to assess families' needs. This includes the routine and effective use of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF).
- The sharing of expertise and good practice between centre staff and the neighbouring Greenleaves Family Centre is good. This ensures that families whose circumstances make them more vulnerable or at risk, are well-protected and monitored effectively to ensure that their lives and circumstances improve. This is particularly the case for families experiencing domestic violence.
- Parents from all walks of life consistently report that they feel welcome and valued because staff provide for their needs in an inclusive and a non-judgemental way. As a result, parents from a variety of backgrounds feel able to contribute routinely to the planning and delivery of services and activities.

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.

Children's Centre details

Unique reference number	22626
Local authority	Cheshire East
Inspection number	427529
Managed by	The local authority

Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	2,563
Centre manager	Ms Deb Lockett
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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