

Mere Children's Centre

Mere School, Springfield Road, Mere, Wiltshire, BA12 6EW

Inspection dates	29–31 July 2014
Previous inspection date	Not previously inspected

Overall effectiveness	This inspection: Previous inspection:	Requires improvement	3
		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 local authority and centre managers do not explore all of the available information to find out why some groups of children do not achieve as well as others at the end of their Reception year at school. These children include those from priority families, those who do not attend a pre-school setting and those known to be eligible for free school meals.
- Not enough partners and parents regularly attend the advisory board. Members do not have all of the information they need to ask probing questions about whether services and groups are making the planned difference to families' lives and drive further improvements.
- The way that the centre collects data means that staff cannot measure the registration and engagement rates for all priority families accurately, including those known to social care.
- Systems to involve staff and partners in evaluating services and measuring the difference that they make to the lives of all families and the learning and progress of adults and children lack rigour.

It has the following strengths:

- The number of families registered and engaging with the centre's services is improving rapidly year on year. Parents are largely satisfied with what the centre provides. The overall quality of family support work is good.
- Most two-year-olds who are eligible for free nursery education are taking up their places in good and outstanding settings. Their progress is tracked closely to ensure this is good.
- Support for disabled children and those with additional needs is good. Information is shared between pre-schools and schools to ensure timely support is provided when children start school.
- The centre provides well-planned training, support and guidance for volunteers. As a result, volunteers support the centre's work well and develop a range of employability skills.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

- Improve the use of data by:
 - ensuring that systems used to collect and collate information on registration and engagement enable the centre to identify how well it is doing in relation to identified priority groups and to improve their access to services
 - tracking the progress of children in priority groups, those who do not take up a free pre-school place and those known to be eligible for free school meals and use the information to plan activities that narrow achievement gaps at the end of the Reception year
 - analysing the progress of adult learners who are signposted on to other programmes to assess the difference the centre has made to their lives.
- Develop the work of the advisory board by ensuring:
 - a wide range of partners, including parents and carers, attend meetings regularly
 - members have a good understanding of their roles and responsibilities
 - members have the information they need, including information regarding the impact or services and outcomes for users, to provide greater challenge and drive improvement.
- Strengthen the systems for involving all partners and staff in the evaluation of services and measuring the impact of services in terms of the difference services make to families' lives.
- Work with the local authority to ensure that the centre has a complete and regularly updated picture of the number of children in the council's care and subject to child protection and child in need plans.

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 an Additional Inspector, working in conjunction with the inspectors leading on each of the other two simultaneous inspections.

The inspectors held meetings with 4Children managers, staff, parents, health, education and community partners, parents, the advisory board and the local authority. They took account of parents' responses in surveys and parents' feedback after groups.

The inspectors visited the centre, observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Inspection team

Penny Fisher, coordinating and lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Graham Saltmarsh

Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about the centre

Mere Children's Centre serves a rural population. It was designated in 2009. There are currently approximately 260 children under the age of five living in the centre's reach area. Almost all families are White British; about 10% are from a number of minority ethnic groups. Children enter school with skills, knowledge and abilities that are generally below those typical for children of their age. There is no onsite childcare or pre-school provision. The centre shares a site with Mere School and the parish council.

The centre is governed and managed by 4Children on behalf of the local authority. The day-to-day running of the centre is carried out by a cluster manager, supported by the 4Children county manager and a national team. The centre works in a cluster with Wilton and Tisbury Children's Centres to provide a range of activities and services at the centres and at outreach venues. It has its own advisory board. The inspections of Wilton Children's Centre and Tisbury Children's Centre took place at the same time and their inspection reports can be found at www.ofsted.gov.uk.

The area covered by the centre contains many dispersed villages with small populations. Two of the four super output areas covered by the centre rank amongst the 20% most deprived in Wiltshire. The area is very varied, with generally affluent villages containing pockets of deprivation and some worklessness. The number of looked after children and children subject to protection plans is low in the area. Around 36 families have a lone parent. The centre has identified its target groups as families with one parent, low income families and those reliant on benefits and families with mental ill-health issues.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Requires improvement

- Systems are in place to monitor the registration and attendance of families, including those expecting children, in centre activities. However, the way that the centre collects data means that the centres cannot measure the registration and engagement rates for some priority families accurately. For example, families with mental ill health are a priority group, but separate data for this group are not collected.
- Overall registration and engagement rates are good. However, only the minority of families from Knoyle and Hindon, an area which is remote to the centre, use the centre's services despite the centre providing Stay and Play craft activities at a local pre-school.
- Information sharing with children's social care requires improvement to ensure that the centre has a complete and regularly updated picture of the number of children in the council's care and subject to child protection and child in need plans.
- Most families of eligible two-year-olds are taking up their entitlement to free early education. Importantly, all of these children are attending high quality provision as most early years provision in the area is judged to be at least good. However, in the Zeals and Maiden Bradley area, below average numbers of three- and four-year-olds are attending early education settings. The reasons for low attendance have not been explored and so the centre and local authority do not know whether these children are from priority families or whether they are achieving well at the end of their Reception year at school.
- The centre uses needs analysis and local knowledge to identify priority groups and plan

services. The large majority of families in most priority groups are registered, but there is more to do to ensure that the large majority of the small numbers of families from minority ethnic groups are known to the centre.

- Overall, the number of families accessing the centre's services shows a trend of improvement over the last three years, despite reductions in funding and a high level of staff turnover and sickness. The centre has seen a 70% increase in the number of families engaging with services since 2011. The sharing of new birth data is ensuring new families are known to the centre; in the last six months 83% of newborns have been registered at the centre.
- Common Assessment Processes are used effectively to identify the needs of disabled children and those who have special educational needs at a young age and ensure effective early support is put into place quickly.

The quality of practice and services

Requires improvement

- Some systems are in place to try and capture the impact of services on outcomes for families and this is recorded in individual family files. However, systems do not always reliably track the progress of families as they are not being used consistently and effectively by all staff and are too dependent on parents' own evaluations of their starting and end points. Some observations of children, recorded in group learning journals, focus too much on the activities children have taken part in rather than the skills and knowledge they have learned.
- The centre monitors attendance and non attendance of individual adults at a range of adult learning and parenting courses. However, it does not routinely analyse attendance and success rates or follow up outcomes of adults signposted on to other programmes.
- The proportion of children in the area reaching a good level of development at end of the Early Years Foundation Stage rose in 2014 from below national and county average levels in 2013. Nevertheless, fewer children reached the levels expected for their age in literacy, communication and language and physical development, and the achievement gap between the lowest attaining children and the rest widened this year.
- The local authority and centre know that in 2013 the achievement gap between those children eligible for free school meals and their peers in the county was wider than found nationally. The reasons for this have not been explored and data at centre level have not been analysed to ensure that services can be targeted at narrowing the gap for these children.
- Arrangements for sharing information with pre-schools and schools about the learning and progress of children with additional needs are good and ensure services and support are in place as soon as they start at a new setting.
- The quality of outreach work to support and improve parenting is good and case recording is generally good. This leads to improved outcomes for most of the small number of families referred and receiving this support. Staff engage fully in joint work with children's social care and Common Assessment Framework processes and team around the family work when requested. Staff refer families to children's social care appropriately when concerns escalate.
- The centre provides well-planned training, support and guidance for volunteers. As a result, volunteers support the centre's work extremely well and develop a range of employability skills. Several have progressed to further and higher education, or into employment.
- The centre staff work well with the health partners to maintain and improve generally good health outcomes in the area. For example, although child clinics are held elsewhere locally, elements of the healthy child programme are delivered from the centre and health

visitors make referrals to the centre for families requiring additional support.

- Reducing obesity rightly remains a priority area of work for the centre. A range of services are provided to support healthy eating and lifestyles, which includes workshops delivered by the community dietician and healthy eating for young children programmes. Volunteers have been trained as breastfeeding peer supporters and provide effective care, help and information for the small number of mothers that attend the drop-in service, who report improved confidence and awareness of the benefits of breastfeeding.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

Requires improvement

- The local authority has strengthened the cycle of performance management to ensure continued improvement. Although local authority monitoring has been taking place, this has been based on the centre's own priorities for improvement. Following a more rigorous and challenging annual conversation this year, measurable and precise targets have been developed and agreed between the local authority and the centre. Targets and areas for improvement are not yet in one manageable smart development plan.
- Advisory board governance requires improvement. Although meeting regularly and sharing important information regarding the needs of families in the local area, not enough partners, including parent representatives, regularly attend meetings. Members receive registration and engagement data, but are not given sufficient information about the difference services are making to families' lives. This limits the ability of the advisory board to challenge the centre about its work and so drive improvement.
- The centre's self-evaluation is up to date and detailed, but overly optimistic. It does not provide sufficient evidence of the difference that services are making to the lives of the families in the area. Staff, parents and advisory board members are not sufficiently well involved in self-evaluation.
- Supervision is provided regularly, but is somewhat task focused. Essential training, such as first aid and child protection training, is ensured, but there is less focus on wider staff development. There are clear links between the centre's priorities and individual staff development appraisals and work plans.
- 4Children's leadership and management processes are embedded in practice and demonstrate high expectations. The cluster manager is well supported by the county manager and national leads within the organisation, who bring expertise and experience.
- Some strong partnerships are proving effective, especially joint work with the health visiting team, who are sharing information with the centre well at both a strategic and individual level. However, some partnerships, including those with midwifery, housing and adult mental health services, are under developed.
- All family support cases are discussed fully and detailed actions planned to ensure continued good support. However, the need to work flexibly across centres and services has impacted on the availability and continuity of family support for a small number of families in the area.
- Safeguarding policies and procedures meet requirements and an annual safeguarding audit is completed and monitored by the local authority. The high priority given to safeguarding is demonstrated through its inclusion as a standing item on the agenda of all meetings, including advisory board meetings. All staff, including volunteers, have received the required training and understand their responsibilities with regard to the protection of children. Families are appropriately referred to children's social care when concerns escalate. Risk assessments are completed and regularly updated.
- Parents are regularly consulted on their views of the centre and are largely positive in their views of the centre. The centre has used various methods in order to gauge opinion,

including meetings and questionnaires, which are also sent to non-users. The centre has been responsive to parents' comments wherever possible; for example, a parenting programme was delivered in the evening at the parents' request.

- Centre staff make best use of available resources. The layout of the centre presents some challenges, but the centre has worked hard to overcome these. Front-line staff that met with inspectors are dedicated and work hard to ensure that services continue to be provided despite a period of high turnover and sickness among the team.

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.

Centre details

Unique reference number	21986
Local authority	Wiltshire
Inspection number	444741
Managed by	4Children on behalf of the local authority

Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	260
Centre leader	Tara Vallance
Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
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