

Sevenoaks Children's Centres

Hospital Road, Sevenoaks, Kent TN13 3PT

Inspection date 29–30 October 2014

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:

- The lack of continuity in leadership of the centre has hindered communications, so that some key partners do not fully understand the new arrangements to meet the needs of families.
- Not enough priority families participate in the activities provided by the centre or their key partners, especially in adult education. Few parents with children under five volunteer or undergo training to enter the workplace.
- Most of the early years settings available to families in the area are of good or better quality. The centre is not yet ensuring that most children who are eligible for free education benefit from this provision. Staff are not rigorously tracking children's development, their learning, or their progress towards readiness for school.
- Case files are not maintained well enough. While they indicate the impact of the help families have received, there is no clear guidance about how they should be organised or the information they must contain. Consequently, information cannot always be found quickly and easily.
- Systems to check that the work of the centre and its partners are making a difference to children's lives in the short and long term lack rigour. The new district advisory board is not yet in a position to challenge and support the centre. Few parents contribute to decision making about key priorities for the centre.

This children's centre group has the following strengths:

- Families have continued to enjoy the good range of activities provided for their children, and to receive individual support through a period of radical, organisational change.
- Parents receive good, individualised care, guidance and support. As a result, they improve their parenting skills and strengthen their mental health. Good quality activities that are planned well and take account of the requirements in the the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework help them to play and learn alongside their children.
- The centre works well with its partners to support families in the most need of assistance to keep children safe. Its work with health services, and the HERO Project particularly, enables different families, including those with disabled children or from Traveller backgrounds, to secure the precise help they need to change lives for the better.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

- Secure continuity in the leadership of the centre. This is to ensure there is clear communication with partners about the ways in which the needs of families are to be met under the new management arrangements.
- Ensure that the information about the participation rates of all priority groups is reliable. Increase the attendance, especially of young parents and parents who are not working, by offering opportunities to volunteer, undergo training, and develop the skills parents need to enter the workplace.
- Improve the ways in which early education is promoted to ensure that most children who are eligible for free early education benefit from it. In activities organised by the centre, track children's development and progress towards their readiness for school.
- Make sure that case files are maintained to a high standard. This is to ensure that the information about decisions, actions and the impact of the work undertaken is recorded clearly.
- Develop systems that enable the local authority, the centre manager, and district advisory board to monitor and evaluate how well the centre, its key partners and commissioned services are making a difference to the lives of families in the short and longer term.
- Strengthen the membership of the district advisory board. Ensure that its membership includes parents, that partners are represented regularly, and that it receives sufficient information to offer effective support and challenge to the centre.

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 three Additional Inspectors.

The inspectors held meetings with the centre manager, staff, members of the district advisory board, parents and the centre's key partners. In addition, inspectors met with representatives of the local authority and spoke on the telephone with others who work with the centre.

The inspectors visited Stay and Play and holiday activities at Spring House and Westerham Hall.

They observed the centre's work and looked at a range of relevant documentation including the centre's self-evaluation, plans for improvement, arrangements with regard to safeguarding children, feedback from parents in surveys and information about the area provided by the local authority.

Inspection team

Kath Beck, Lead Inspector

Additional Inspector

Jean Cook

Additional Inspector

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Full report

Information about the centre

Sevenoaks Children's Centres is a new single centre under the direct management of the local authority, and a district advisory board. It was created in April 2014 when Kent reorganised its children's centres into clusters. Spring House, situated on the same site as Sevenoaks Hospital, is the hub of activities and serves as the main office. Edenbridge Centre is located 25 minutes away from Spring House in the grounds of Edenbridge Primary School (URN118554). Services are also provided at the Eden Centre, Westerham Hall, Halstead Primary School (URN118274) and local parks in the holidays. The schools are subject to separate inspection arrangements, and their reports can be found at www.ofsted.gov.uk.

The centre provides early childhood services, health services, parenting courses and adult education in conjunction with its key partners, most of which are commissioned services. It works with the Sevenoaks HERO Project and Westerham Food Bank to support families in most need. The centre puts families in touch with the right people for advice about mental health, jobs and childcare. There have been many changes of staff since January 2014, some have only just been recruited. Senior leaders at the local authority have only been in post for a short time. The manager based in Spring House is the fifth this year, and will remain in post until March 2015.

The centre covers 75 square miles of rural Kent, where families are isolated and transport is limited. There are 4,079 children under five years of age living in the area. There are pockets of considerable hardship. Children enter early years provision with levels of knowledge and skill that are below those that are typical for their age.

The centre has identified the priority groups requiring particular support as lone parents, Travellers, those who speak English as an additional language, families in financial difficulties, workless households, young parents, children in need of protection, parents with diminished mental health, and families with disabilities or additional needs.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Requires improvement

- Staff at the centre work well with their key partners to identify priority families with young children. To overcome difficulties of travelling to activities in the centres, staff provide a range of services in varied locations across the area. This has increased the number of children and families who are registered, including those less likely to do so, but not all groups are sustaining their contact over time.
- Systems to check the number of families and different groups who are attending regularly are new. Information about attendance and participation rates is collected. With the merging of different data collection methods, the information is not reliable enough to give staff a clear picture of how often those in most need are attending.
- Generally strong partnerships with health mean the centre establishes good contact with expectant mothers and new parents, where needs, especially those related to mental health are quickly recognised. Parents are directed to a range of services, but staff at the centre are not always aware of how well these services are accessed or the difference they make.
- The centre has a number of volunteers who provide valuable support in the baby and breast feeding clinics. However, few parents of children under five use the opportunities available to them to volunteer support for other activities, undergo training or to attend courses to develop the skills to help them back to work.
- Staff promote the take up of free education for two-year-olds by directing families to providers who are good or outstanding. Not enough families take advantage of this, although most three- and four-year-olds attend pre-school or nursery provision.
- Most assessments for two-year-olds are completed with health partners in the centre, and outcomes

are shared. Where additional needs are identified, staff ensure that parents and children are supported quickly.

- All families who are most in need of support to keep their children free from harm are referred to the centre for individual help. They engage well with the range of family support services.

The quality of practice and services

Requires improvement

- The centre rightly takes its services into the community. It develops new partnerships effectively, such as with the local food bank, to support those most in need. Staff are considering innovative ways to enable those living in the most isolated communities, where transport is limited, to use its services regularly and improve their life chances.
- There is a good range of services that are open to everyone or to those needing specific support. Some services, including breastfeeding support and adult education, are contracted out. There are instances where good work has been done to help new mothers in sustaining breastfeeding and numbers are rising. Generally, too little is known about the impact of adult education courses on parents, especially in their efforts to return to work.
- The centre's partnerships with Jobcentre Plus and the HERO Project enable some families to receive effective support and advice to overcome challenges in obtaining work, benefits and housing. The centre has anecdotal evidence that this has been beneficial to families in financial difficulty, Travellers and families with disabilities. It has less information to show that improvements have been sustained.
- Parents say they welcome the good quality care, guidance and support that help them to improve their parenting skills and their children's behaviour. Mothers suffering postnatal depression are encouraged to join in activities where they can enjoy playing and learning alongside their children. They are signposted to other services, such as health and MIND, but the centre does not track their progress sufficiently.
- Early Help Practitioners, who work with families out in the community, are highly valued. They have been particularly successful in encouraging young parents to attend sessions at the centre and become less isolated. That said, not all case files provide a clear, coherent record of the progress made by families following one-to-one support.
- The centre has a number of volunteers who bring valuable expertise in supporting young families. Few are parents of children under five, and very few use volunteering as a pathway to return to work and improve the economic stability of their families.
- The centre, including its other locations, is well equipped with a good range of resources to support children's learning. Activities, such as Splish, Splash, Hop, Stay and Play and Monday Club, help parents to play and learn alongside their children. Some staff have only recently begun to work with parents to track children's progress in their 'My unique profile' book. They do not often note how well children are developing their knowledge and skills or are making progress towards being ready for school.
- Parents who speak English as an additional language benefit from attending Bi-lingual Mini sessions. Some parents have moved on to attend classes to improve their English, set up their own support group, and offer translation services to the centre.
- Staff at the centre know that domestic violence and abusive relationships are experienced by a significant number of women. They have developed good partnerships with others supporting these families, and run a specially designed programme to help them to deal with their situations more effectively.
- Prenatal and antenatal clinics are very popular. As a result, families in the most need are identified early on and move on to access services run by the centre.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

Requires improvement

- The local authority has established clear long-term plans for the development of the centre. It has

set appropriate challenges to improve practice and ensure that resources, in the locality and across the district, are used appropriately to meet differing needs.

- The new centre manager is facing the many challenges brought about by the reorganisation with determination. Many staff are new; some have yet to take up their post, whilst others have new roles and responsibilities. This has caused difficulties in lines of communication with regard to the procedures to be followed with some of the key partners.
- Since the reorganisation, the district advisory board has not been in a position to offer rigorous challenge and support to the centre. Parents and schools are no longer represented, and attendance by some other partners is sporadic. The reports its members receive are not sufficiently detailed to enable thorough checks on its performance, for example to ensure that the centre is reaching all priority children and families and making a difference to their well-being over time.
- Self-evaluation and systems to check the work of the centre and its key partners are at an early stage of development. The local authority checks that agreements about the services its partners are to provide are kept and they sustain contact with families. Nevertheless, there is little follow up to demonstrate how effectively the centre and its partners are reducing inequalities and improving the lives of families in the area.
- Staff follow the local safeguarding board procedures. They use the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) and Team Around the Family (TAF) procedures to work closely with health, social care and other partners to support families of children assessed as being in need, or subject to a child protection plan. Training for safeguarding is up to date and suitability checks have been carried out on new staff.
- Parents have the opportunity to shape some services offered through informal feedback. Staff listen to them and act on suggestions, for example changing the location of Stay and Play sessions and organising a family learning course. However, not enough parents are involved in identifying key priorities; few formal meetings arranged to seek their views have taken place in the past six months.

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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Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	4,079
Centre leader	Ann Woodberry
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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