

Maidstone town children's centre group

Greenfields Children's Centre, Rutland Way, Shepway, Maidstone, Kent ME15 8DR

Inspection dates	18–20 June 2014
Previous inspection date	Not previously inspected

Overall effectiveness	This inspection: Previous inspection:	Inadequate	4
		Not previously inspected	
Access to services by young children and families		Inadequate	4
The quality of practice and services		Inadequate	4
The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management		Inadequate	4

Summary of key findings for children and families

This children's centre group is inadequate.

- The procedures to protect some children who are in most need are not robust enough. Action is not always taken quickly enough to keep all children safe.
- Leaders and managers do not always have enough information available to them to clearly identify what families need.
- There is not enough support for families who speak English as an additional language, or for children who have special educational needs.
- Too few opportunities are available for parents who want to become volunteers, or those who wish to complete courses to support them back into training and employment.
- Centre leaders have not been able to closely monitor the quality of practice in some sessions. This means not all activities and groups are as good as others.
- There are insufficient systems in place for staff to monitor children's progress during crèche and centre activities.
- The numbers of military families using services is too low. Attendance at some activities is also low.
- Midwives do not deliver antenatal services from the centres. This means prospective mothers are not introduced to children's centres prior to giving birth.
- Systems for senior managers to monitor the quality of the centres' work are too new. It is too early to see how quickly improvements can be made.
- Recent leadership and management changes have prevented staff from accessing relevant training and being supported to deliver high-quality services.

It has the following strengths:

- The level of care, guidance and support offered to families using the centres is strong.

What does the group need to do to improve further?

- Improve safeguarding arrangements across the centres to:
 - ensure all staff are fully trained and clearly understand the procedures to follow when they have concerns about a child
 - ensure the recording, reporting and referral of any concerns about a child are clearly documented and monitored closely through effective case supervision
 - ensure children's centre staff and leaders work effectively with social care colleagues, and any other agencies, to clearly document all concerns about a child or family's welfare, and consistently take prompt, effective action to keep children safe
 - ensure all staff continually implement the centres' policy for the safe use of cameras and mobile phones.
- Strengthen governance arrangements by:
 - ensuring procedures for monitoring the effectiveness of the centres' work and performance are improved and play a vital role in driving improvement
 - ensuring the local authority provides relevant resources and capacity for centre leaders and staff to make the necessary improvements, such as the provision of relevant data to help leaders measure performance
 - implementing procedures for staff to have relevant professional supervision when managing complex safeguarding cases.
- Improve leadership arrangements by:
 - ensuring resources are available to provide staff with the relevant skills, competence and experience to deliver high-quality services
 - reviewing the systems for performance management to ensure all services delivered by the centres are monitored closely and are of consistently good, or better, quality
 - ensuring the procedures for safeguarding children are continually monitored.
- Improve the use of data to:
 - ensure leaders and managers can accurately monitor the registration and engagement levels of all target families
 - help centre staff to monitor take-up rates of all centre activities and clearly demonstrate the impact of centre services
 - develop clear procedures to ensure centre leaders can measure and track the improvements of all target families and groups of families
 - clearly demonstrate how the centres are working towards closing the attainment gap between the most disadvantaged children and the rest
 - ensure the right services and relevant programmes are in place to meet local need.
- Improve the delivery of early years services by:
 - ensuring all activities are linked to the Early Years Foundation Stage with clear planning in place for each session
 - ensuring clear records are in place to demonstrate all children's learning and progress from their initial starting points
 - making better use of data and links with feeder schools to clearly demonstrate the impact of children's centre services on improving children's readiness for school
 - using data more effectively to identify any gaps in children's learning.
- Increase the number of families engaging with the centres from the identified priority groups, particularly military families, those from workless households, families who speak English as an additional language, and children with special educational needs.
- Increase the amount of adult learning and volunteering opportunities to enable a greater number of families, especially those from workless households, to access training and employment.
- Develop strategic partnerships to enable antenatal services to be delivered directly from the centres and engage a higher number of prospective parents into children's centre services.

Inspection team

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Full report

Information about the group

Maidstone town is a group of six children's centres in the Maidstone district of Kent. The centres serve the town centre and surrounding villages covering a densely populated area. The centres are managed directly by the local authority. A district manager oversees the group. There are three children's centre managers who oversee the operational management on a daily basis.

The centres work in partnership with a number of organisations to provide a range of activities open to all families and those especially designed for priority groups. These include: stay and play activities, family support services, adult education and health promotion programmes. East Borough, West Borough, Greenfields and Sunshine children's centres share the same sites as primary schools, although they are subject to separate inspection arrangements. Independent early years provision is also provided on the same sites as East Borough (Trinity Pre-School EY244005); Howard De Walden (Little Monsters EY468478); Sunshine (Little Stars Pre-School 127343 and Smarties Workplace Nursery EY264935); and The Meadow children's centre (The Meadow Children's Centre Nursery EY335427). These settings were not inspected at the same time as the centres. Inspection reports can be accessed at www.ofsted.gov.uk

There are 7,848 children aged under five years living in the community served by the centres. Around 14% of families living in the locality are from minority ethnic backgrounds; the main groups being mixed British, Eastern European, Middle Eastern and Nepalese families. About 17% of families are workless and dependent on benefits. There are pockets of deprivation; for example, in the wards of Shepway South, High Street and Parkwood. In areas covered by Sunshine and The Meadow children's centres, families live in areas that are deemed to be the least advantaged areas of the country. Housing is a mixture of social housing and privately owned homes.

The centres' main priority groups are children and families with English as an additional language, workless households and military families. Children's skills, knowledge and abilities on entry to early years provision are generally below those typical for their age.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Inadequate

- Not all families from identified priority groups, especially the military families, and those who speak English as an additional language, regularly access services. Links with other organisations are in place to improve this, but it is too early to assess their effectiveness.
- Data are not used consistently accurately to identify families' needs. This means services are not always targeted at the families who need it the most. Assessment of need is not always robust enough, especially for the families who are also supported by other agencies.
- Insufficient action is taken when families who are known to be vulnerable, and are under the support of social services, do not attend appointments or access centre activities. This means staff cannot sufficiently monitor children's welfare and ensure that children known to be at risk are kept safe.
- Attendance at some groups is very low. For example, during the inspection, only four

young parents were seen at the 'Young Parents' group. Only three families attended the 'Baby Bumpkins' session. Records indicate that regular attendance at some parenting courses is also often low.

- Midwifery and antenatal services are not delivered directly from the centres. This means prospective parents are not always made aware of the centres' services and the support available to them.
- Insufficient help is available to reduce the numbers of children living in workless households. Although a small number of parents have been supported back into employment, this number is very low.
- Around 74% of two-year-old children eligible for funded early years education access provision. However, in Kent, military families are not eligible for this. This means some children are not accessing services. The vast majority of children aged three and four years access their entitlement to funded early education.
- Support for children with special educational needs is developing. A number of parents have established their own group specifically for children with disabilities, supported by centre staff. The local authority recognises additional support is now needed for individual families through one-to-one working arrangements and in conjunction with Portage.
- The centres' systems for recording registration and engagement data do not clearly help leaders and managers identify whether the centres are reaching all families who are known to be vulnerable and in need of support. This means it is harder for staff to make contact with families who are not yet accessing services.
- The centres take relevant action to help parents who do not speak English, or those with limited literacy, to access information. Interactive display boards with speaker buttons and translation services within the centres help to make information more readily accessible.

The quality of practice and services

Inadequate

- The centres do not use data robustly to track the quality and impact of their work with the most disadvantaged families. Insufficient evidence is collated to assess the starting points of some families and evaluate the impact of the centres' work over time.
- When families are referred to other agencies, such as for support in preparing unemployed parents for work, systems to monitor the effectiveness of this are not in place.
- Due to reductions in staffing, the quality of some of the centres' work has been affected. Crèche staff do not routinely assess children's learning and development needs. Checks on children's progress are not carried out. Therefore, it is unclear how children's progress has been monitored, or how the attainment gap between the most disadvantaged children and the rest is closing.
- Leaders and managers have been unable to closely monitor the quality of some centre activities. Restrictions to staffing arrangements have had an impact on staff training. This means not all sessions are of high quality and this affects the centres' ability to prepare children for starting school.
- Support is readily available to help parents understand the importance of healthy eating and how to adopt a healthy lifestyle. However, data indicate obesity levels are still too high and above county and national averages in The Meadows area. This remains a key priority for the group.
- Good support is provided for the promotion of breastfeeding through an expert lactation consultant. However, breastfeeding rates vary widely between centres and are lowest at The Meadows centre at 18%.
- The centres provide effective support for parents' emotional well-being. The parents who

access centre services confirm they feel more confident, better prepared to manage their children's behaviour and more assertive in making life-changing decisions.

- The centres have supported 19 volunteers this year. These parents stated it had given them confidence to gain new skills and to undertake qualifications. One parent who is now in employment told inspectors, 'I couldn't have done it without the centre staff. They have always been there for me.'
- The quality of some adult learning programmes is good as tutors use real examples to help parents apply their learning. For example, during a mathematics session focused on decimals, parents compared the sugar content expressed on cereal boxes. This made the session meaningful and enabled parents to use their learning in an everyday situation.
- Some sessions are delivered by confident, experienced staff and there is good promotion of babies' early language and communication skills. For example, this was extended well in the 'Baby Bumpkins' session at The Meadow centre and also at the 'Singing and Story Time' at Howard De Walden. However, practice at other activities is variable and not always so effective.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

Inadequate

- Safeguarding arrangements are weak. Insufficient action is taken when crèche staff identify concerns about children who are already known to be subject to child protection plans. Although referrals are made, systems to follow up information, and procedures for recording and reporting concerns, are inadequate.
- The Common Assessment Framework processes are used by centre staff to provide early support to children and families. However, the quality of action planning is variable and managers recognise staff need additional training. The referral process is not prompt enough for relevant services to take appropriate action to keep vulnerable children safe.
- Not all staff actively promote the centres' safeguarding procedures within centre activities. For example, although notices are displayed prohibiting the use of mobile phones and cameras, during the inspection parents were seen using phones to make telephone calls and to take photographs. Staff did not challenge this or help parents understand the safeguarding concerns associated with this.
- Case supervision arrangements are poor. Due to staffing issues, managers have not had sufficient time to clearly document case discussions and to provide detailed records of agreed actions.
- Local authority leaders have not ensured that managers and staff have relevant information and resources to inform them of local needs. This means services are not based on the robust analysis of data. Few systems are in place for staff to track and monitor the impact of their work.
- Significant changes to management arrangements have had a negative impact on the delivery of activities. Managers have not been able to recruit new staff, and existing staff have not benefited from updated training and effective procedures for monitoring the quality of their work.
- Governance arrangements have not been sufficiently robust to track the slippages in service delivery. A new district advisory board chairperson has been appointed with significant senior leadership experience. However, she has only been in post since March 2014 and has not yet had time to demonstrate the impact of her role in challenging leaders and driving the centres' continual improvement.
- Strategic agreements have not been put in place with midwifery services to ensure ante-natal clinics operate directly from the centres. This means prospective parents do not

always know the services available to them.

- Resources are not deployed effectively. Leaders and managers have not been given sufficient time and appropriate levels of staffing to deliver services of a consistently good or better standard. Despite this, staff have pulled together extremely well as a team in an attempt to keep providing services and ensure families still use the centres.
- The centres benefit from a recently appointed, highly motivated, competent and dynamic district manager who is acutely aware of how recent management changes have had an impact on the range and quality of services.

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.

Group details

Unique reference number	80808
Local authority	Kent
Inspection number	446355
Managed by	The local authority

Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	7,848
District Manager	Hema Birdi
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Telephone number	01622 699900
Email address	maidstonecc@kent.gov.uk

This group consists of the following children's centres:

- East Borough children's centre (21015)
- Greenfields children's centre (21307)
- Howard De Walden children's centre (21569)
- Sunshine children's centre (23012)
- The Meadow children's centre (23218)
- West Borough children's centre (23494)

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