

Tonbridge and Malling Children's Centre Group

Chapman Way, East Malling, Kent, ME19 6SD

Inspection dates	12–14 November 2014
Previous inspection date	1 November 2013

Overall effectiveness	This inspection:	Requires improvement	3
	Previous inspection:	Inadequate	4
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		Good	2

Summary of key findings for children and families

This is a centre that requires improvement.

- Although the number of families registered at the centres has significantly increased, not many regularly engage in different services.
- Systems to monitor the quality and impact of the centres' work on the families most in need are not yet fully developed.
- Leaders and managers have a very good understanding of what improvements are still necessary. Many procedures have been put in place to address these, but it is too early to see the impact.

It is not good because:

- Staff are only just beginning to use accurate information to identify the different families living in the area who may need additional help.
- Tracking systems are new so leaders and managers are unable to demonstrate the impact of the centres' work on some families, especially lone parents, fathers and teenage parents.
- Not all procedures are in place to prepare adults who wish to return to work.
- The number of two-year-old children using their entitlement to free early years provision is low.

It has the following strengths:

- Staff have worked tirelessly to improve services and ensure families receive relevant support.
- The strong leadership team and effective district advisory board mean improvements are being seen at a fast rate and the capacity to maintain this progress is good.
- Families who use the centres' services fully appreciate the help and support they receive.
- The quality of the centres' work on individual families, and those most in need, is good.

What does the group need to do to improve further?

- Continue to make improved use of the information provided by the local authority to:
 - accurately identify the different groups of families living in the area who may need additional help
 - increase the numbers of children, especially two-year-olds, taking up their entitlement to funded early years provision
 - increase the numbers of teenage parents, and fathers, regularly engaging with services
 - monitor the engagement levels of all families to ensure services continue to match families' needs
 - enable leaders and managers, and those responsible for governance, to continually track and monitor the impact of the centres' work on identified family groups.
- Further develop the work started with adult learning providers and Jobcentre Plus to prepare adults for work and/or improve their chances of securing paid employment by:
 - offering improved careers guidance and advice so that parents can plan their employment pathways
 - sharing information about the progress adults make in their training and development
 - sharpening the focus on improving parents' employability skills in the planning of centre services
 - increasing the use of the volunteer programme.

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 two of Her Majesty's Inspectors and three Additional Inspectors.

The inspectors held meetings with: the children's centre early help group manager and senior leaders from the local authority; centre staff; representatives from commissioned services; health professionals, social workers and social care staff; local headteachers; managers of early years settings; members of the district advisory board and parents' forum; and parents.

The inspectors visited a range of services and activities taking place at each of the centres and in community venues, including a baby massage session and baby clinics. They observed Music Mayhem, Hop, Skip and Jump, the SPACE group and Active Tots sessions. Inspectors also attended an evening parentcraft session and made observations of a Learning through Play course for parents and a Team Around the Family (TAF) meeting.

The inspection covered the following children's centres: Borough Green; Burham; Little Foxes; Snodland; South Tonbridge; and Woodlands.

Inspectors observed the centres' work and looked at a range of relevant documentation. This included the group's development plan, Early Years Foundation Stage Profile information and reports on the centres' performance.

Inspection team

Jo Caswell, Lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Harmesh Manghra	Her Majesty's Inspector
Libby Dickson	Additional inspector
Helen Hutchings	Additional inspector
Graham Saltmarsh	Additional inspector

Full report

Information about the group

The Tonbridge and Malling Children's Centre Group consists of six centres serving the towns and villages to the west and north west of Maidstone in Kent. A group manager oversees all six centres on behalf of the local authority. A district advisory board provides governance arrangements. There are 7,468 children aged under five years living in the community served by the centres.

The area is exceptionally diverse. The numbers of children living in workless households varies significantly across the six centres, from 27% in the Woodlands area to 6% in the Borough Green area. The vast majority of families are of White British heritage. The Woodlands centre is located on the site of the former St James the Great Primary School. It forms part of a community development which includes a social enterprise community hub, a family learning centre and a community café. The area has high levels of unemployment and the rural location means some families feel socially isolated. Woodlands Children's Centre covers the wards of East Malling, Ditton, Kings Hill, Larkfield and Leybourne. Kings Hill is mainly affluent, with pockets of social housing amongst privately-owned homes and commercial buildings.

The Little Foxes centre is located on the site of Longmead School in the Trench ward. Trench is a community with a high level of deprivation and sits in the highest 30% of deprivation for Kent. The Snodland Children's Centre is located in a building owned by the Primary Care Trust shared with health visitors, community district nurses and a podiatrist. Services also run from a local community centre within the area. Borough Green Children's Centre is situated within Borough Green Primary School and opens on a part time basis. South Tonbridge Children's Centre operates from the Teen to Twenty Club, off Tonbridge High Street. The centre was badly affected by flooding in December 2013, so services had to be temporarily re-located to St Stephens Primary School. The centre was re-opened in July 2014 following refurbishment, but services continue to run both from the school site and the centre building. Burham Children's Centre is located on the site of Burham Primary School and serves a number of isolated villages. The catchment area borders with Medway council. There is limited public transport so children's centre outreach services are provided in the villages. None of the co-located schools were inspected at the same time during this inspection as they are subject to separate inspection arrangements. The inspection reports can be accessed at www.ofsted.gov.uk.

The local authority works 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, family learning, adult education and health promotion programmes. The centres' main priority groups include children supported through social care arrangements, families living in the most deprived areas and young parents.

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

Requires improvement

- Since the last inspection, staff have worked tirelessly to promote the children's centres within the community. As a result, the numbers of families registered have consistently increased from 48% to 63% over the last year. However, the number of families regularly using services is low and averages at 39% across the group.
- Until recently, the local authority has not been able to provide accurate information on the numbers of different families living in the area. This means staff do not always know the exact number of lone parents, fathers, children living in workless households, or disabled children who are accessing services. Information is now available and the centres' leaders are beginning to use this.

- Despite the fairly limited range of information provided to the centres, staff have targeted their work in the most deprived areas. This means some of the most vulnerable families are registered at the centres and benefit from the support available. In the centres' most deprived area, 68% of children are registered at the centres. Good work has been carried out to successfully engage some of the families who are less likely to attend children's centre services.
- Across the centre group, approximately half of children known to be at risk and known to social care are supported through children's centre services. Of these, 71% are deemed as children in need. Through targeted support for parents, the number of children becoming subject to child protection arrangements is reducing.
- The centres do not have accurate information on the numbers of teenage parents living in the area. Some are registered and regularly access services, especially the Young Parents group and support from the Family Nurse Partnership and Beat Project. However, it is unclear whether all teenage parents are reached.
- The number of two-year-old children who are eligible for funded early years education and take up their places is low at 60%. Until now, without accurate data, staff have been unable to identify who the children not accessing services are. Work is now beginning to address this.
- Good links with partners, particularly early years settings, schools and health services, help staff to identify and support families in need of the most support. This contributes towards the increase in the numbers of families registered at the centres.
- Staff work tirelessly to identify different ways to enable families to benefit from centre services. Midwifery clinics and parentcraft classes are delivered from centres and introduce prospective parents to the support available. In the most rural areas, staff deliver services in community venues and with families on an individual basis. This means the most vulnerable and isolated families receive the support they need.

The quality of practice and services

Requires improvement

- The children's centre group offers a wide range of services, including those which are aimed at all families and those aimed at families who need additional help. Most of these are well attended and support the needs of local families. However, not enough families, particularly from target groups, regularly access services after they have registered at the centres.
- Procedures to monitor the quality and impact of groups are still in the early stages. As a result, it is too early to see evidence of long term impact on families over time.
- Opportunities for adult learning, particularly in literacy and numeracy, are limited. Information is not always obtained from adult learning providers and/or Jobcentre Plus to ensure centre staff understand parents' training needs. Not enough support is given to parents looking for information about returning to employment. Although good work is carried out in conjunction with the Beat Project, especially with young parents, the centres' leaders have rightly recognised this as an ongoing improvement area.
- Systems to monitor the impact of the centres' work on vulnerable families over time have not been fully implemented. Staff do not routinely assess and record the skills and abilities of children and parents when they first start using the centres and track their progress over time. A system is now in place to address this, but it is still in the early stages.
- The number of adults completing volunteering opportunities to enhance their employment prospects is low but increasing, and further improvement work is planned for next year. Centre leaders have accurately identified the need to make greater use of volunteering to help develop parents' employability skills. A small number of parents have benefited from working within the community café at the St James centre.
- Stay and Play groups are very popular and many sessions, such as Messy Play, Active Tots and Music Mayhem, are often over booked. Parents confirm how much they enjoy attending and the sessions help children to socialise and become ready for starting school.
- Courses such as Striving to Thriving and accredited parenting programmes for some of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable families have a very positive impact on parents' confidence and emotional well-being. One parent summarised the view of many by telling inspectors, 'I just feel so

much better and more confident.'

- The health and well-being of children are significantly improving. Breastfeeding rates and the numbers of children of Reception age having a healthy weight either exceed, or are in line with, national levels. Health professionals are currently working with centre staff to reduce the numbers of children living in households where adults smoke. This has been recognised as a health issue within the area and coordinated support is in place to address this.
- Children develop a good range of skills to help them to become ready for starting school. Staff have developed close links with local pre-schools, nurseries and childminders. Individual support is offered to children who require additional help with their learning. As a result, at the end of the Reception year, children achieve better than the national average. In some cases, boys achieve better than girls and this is in contrast with progress rates seen nationally.
- On an individual basis, many parents confirmed to inspectors the positive impact the children's centres have on their lives. One parent described to inspectors how her life changed after her first visit to a centre by stating, 'My life has been brightened up since that day.' Many parents also described the work of the centres as 'invaluable'. One parent told inspectors, 'I would be lost without it.'

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

Good

- Leaders and managers share a strong vision for the centres and have high aspirations for local families. They have an extremely accurate view of the strengths and priority areas for development. Challenging action plans, close performance monitoring and strategic targets are now in place to continue to improve the quality and range of services.
- The centres are managed by an extremely effective leader. She is highly respected by staff from partner agencies, senior managers within the local authority and her own team. During the last year, she has shown exceptional dedication in overcoming significant issues which could have affected the smooth running of the centres and the services available.
- Due to the strong leadership and highly committed staff team, the capacity to sustain improvement is good. Comprehensive reviews and incisive evaluations of services have accelerated the rate of improvements being seen.
- Leaders and managers are highly focused on increasing the numbers of families engaging with centre services. Information about the families is now beginning to be used more robustly to identify which parents and children are most in need. However, the leadership team recognises that more work is necessary to improve the sustained engagement levels of priority families.
- The district advisory board provides effective challenge and contributes towards the centres' continued improvement. Close attention is paid towards monitoring the centres' performance and ensuring the management of the centres continues to be highly effective. Board members have an extremely accurate overview of the centres' strengths and the priority areas for improvement.
- The local authority closely monitors the performance of the centres and uses information to identify how effectively the range of services meets families' needs. Good progress is being seen in improving children's skills ready for starting school and the healthy development of families.
- Senior leaders from partner services were keen to commend the centre staff. Many described their work as 'invaluable' and 'superb'. Health professionals confirmed their own work was significantly enhanced by centre staff. Local headteachers and managers from early years settings clearly value the work of the children's centres.
- Excellent working arrangements with midwives, health visitors, headteachers, the police and social care colleagues mean appropriate action is taken swiftly and fewer children are becoming subject to child protection arrangements.
- The children's centre group is currently trialling a new way of working to manage the support for child protection cases. The 'sandbox' model has only been in place since September this year, but already improved working arrangements are in place with different agencies. This ensures all cases are frequently monitored and reviewed, and relevant prevention work is carried out to keep children

safe.

- Despite running with reduced budgets, and with a current 50% shortage in the relevant number of staff, the dedication of the staff team has ensured that high quality services have continued to be delivered. Resources are of good quality and are managed well across a large, complex geographical area.
- The parents' group, Transform Us, is used especially well to seek the views of parents and to help make improvements to the delivery 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	80814
Local authority	Kent
Inspection number	450586
Managed by	The local authority

Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	7,468
Early Help Group Manager	Beth Hodges
Date of previous inspection	1 November 2013
Telephone number	01732 874086
Email address	tmcc@kent.gov.uk

This group consists of the following children's centres:

- (23690) Borough Green Children's Centre
- (20502) Burham Children's Centre
- (21809) Little Foxes Children's Centre
- (22746) Snodland Children's Centre
- (22779) South Tonbridge Children's Centre
- (21029) Woodlands Children's Centre

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