

Inspection report for Bede/St Mary's Children's Centre

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Linked school if applicable	Not applicable
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Introduction

The inspection addresses the centre's contribution to:

- facilitating access to early childhood services by parents, prospective parents and young children
- maximising the benefit of those services to parents, prospective parents and young children
- improving the well-being of young children.

The report is made to the local authority and a copy is sent to the children's centre. The local authority may send the report to such persons it considers appropriate and must arrange for an action plan to be produced in relation to the findings in this report.

This inspection was carried out by one additional inspector and one early years inspector. The inspectors held meetings and spoke with centre management and staff, representatives of the local authority, health services and other partner organisations, members of the advisory board and parents. They observed the centre's work and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

Bede/St Mary's Children's Centre is located in Jarrow in South Tyneside. This is an area of high economic deprivation. Many residents are employed part time or on low wages and 41% of children aged from birth to four years live in households dependent on workless benefits; 8.8% of families are eligible to claim the childcare element of working tax credit. Children enter the Early Years Foundation Stage with knowledge and skills slightly below the national average. The majority of families are of White British background, although there are small East European and Black communities.

The centre occupies two sites; activities, administration, outreach and childcare for children aged from birth to three years are delivered from premises attached to the Perth Green Community Centre. Childcare provision for three- to five-year-olds is located a short distance away within the nursery of St Mary's Roman Catholic Primary School.

Bede/St Mary's Children's Centre is one of four centres that make up a local cluster. It opened in 2003 with full designation from 2005 and is a phase one centre, providing the full core offer, including health care and adult learning. Management of the centre has recently transferred from the governors of St Mary's Roman Catholic Primary School to the local authority and there is an advisory board in place which is responsible for the cluster; parents are represented on the board.

Inspection judgements

Grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Overall effectiveness

The effectiveness of the children's centre in meeting the needs of and improving outcomes for families

2

Capacity for sustained improvement

The centre's capacity for sustained improvement, including the quality of its leadership and management

2

Main findings

Bede/St Mary's Children's Centre provides a good service to families in the area. Staff have a good understanding of the local community and work hard to involve as many families as possible. Users speak highly of the support they have received and how it has made a positive difference to them and their children.

Parents are very loyal to the centre with some families, who have moved away from the area, still returning to the centre to attend sessions. They say that they find the centre 'more welcoming' and the staff 'friendlier than other centres'. One parent said that the centre was 'a friendly, safe place to go'.

Recently appointed managers know the strengths of their staff and have a clear vision of how they wish the centre to develop. They have been quick to initiate cooperation with other children's centres and partner agencies. Integrated working with partners such as health and social care is a particular strength. Professionals from other agencies now see the children's centre as an equal partner and are clear that this has improved outcomes for users. This results in the centre having a good capacity for sustained improvement.

The availability of childcare on the premises allows the centre to offer parents childcare places as part of a support package. This enables the centre to engage well with parents who might otherwise be reluctant to attend parenting skills classes or receive other support. This has resulted in good outcomes for families who might otherwise have been reluctant to engage with the centre.

The development of purposeful learning and skills for adults is satisfactory. The centre currently runs a range of adult courses aimed at improving parenting skills. The courses are well attended and popular with parents. However, there are no courses planned that will improve parents' literacy or numeracy skills or give them the opportunity to gain qualifications which may increase their employment opportunities. Also, although basic skills courses are offered in another nearby children's centre, no users from this reach area are currently accessing them.

Parents' access to training and employment is satisfactory. The centre supports parents to return to work by providing childcare and in some cases by offering training opportunities within the centre. Although staff from Jobcentre Plus regularly send the centre a list of vacancies to display, it does not provide any support or advice to centre staff in promoting employment or training opportunities nor does it monitor whether centre users have proceeded into work or training.

While leadership and management generally are good with equality and diversity and safeguarding particularly well managed, governance of the centre is satisfactory. Members of the cluster advisory board, which includes some parents, are insufficiently trained for their role.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- The children's centre should offer adult learning and training courses which are aimed at improving parents' skills and qualifications and increasing their employment opportunities.
- Jobcentre Plus should work more closely with the children's centre to promote vacancies and to support users into employment or training and should monitor the progress these users make.
- The local authority should offer members of the cluster advisory board appropriate training that will enable them to carry out their duties.

How good are outcomes for families?

2

Outcomes for children and families are good. The centre works well to promote healthy outcomes for users. The centre works closely with health visitors to encourage breastfeeding. A parent volunteer who has been trained as a breastfeeding counsellor attends all baby clinics; further volunteers are completing training. This initiative has resulted in an increase in the rate of breastfeeding in the reach area.

The centre promotes exercise for children in specific groups such as 'Bede Bouncers' and 'Boogie Babies' as well as at the end of general play sessions, offering weaning courses as well as advice on healthy eating. Parents commented that their children now enjoy eating fruit as a direct result of children's centre sessions. Parents and children exercise more regularly because the centre offers free membership to the adjoining community centre gym and subsidised family entry to local swimming pools.

The centre has been proactive in changing the smoking habits of parents. As a result of research carried out by the centre, some smoking cessation work is now targeted at fathers. The centre promotes smoke-free homes and cars and in a recent survey all parents stated

that they no longer smoke in their house or car, this is a significant improvement for their children.

The centre has achieved good outcomes for children on child protection plans or subject to the Common Assessment Framework (CAF). Since June 2011, the number of children with child protection plans has been reduced from 12 to nine; 13 out of 44 children have been removed from the CAF. All looked after children in the area access the centre, and their parents have some contact visits during centre activities.

The centre promotes the safety of children well. Parents receive a home safety pack on first registration. Outreach staff give home safety advice and can provide safety equipment where a need is identified. First aid courses have proved popular and parents say that they now feel more confident dealing with emergencies.

The centre works well with parents and helps them to become more actively involved in the development of their children through playing and reading with them. The centre achieves this by providing a range of developmental activities for children and by showing parents how they can help their child learn. For example, the 'baby signing' class encourages parents to observe and support their child's first efforts at communication and parents commented that they found this very useful.

Staff maintain a developmental record for each child, including photographic evidence, which is used to identify where additional support is required and which is shared with the parents. Parents are invited to keep their own record in an attractively produced booklet and say that this has helped them to appreciate what their children are capable of achieving.

The centre's special educational needs coordinator has identified a high number of children with speech difficulties and has targeted activities at language development, including a Nursery Rhyme Challenge in conjunction with the local library. The centre's monitoring has identified that good progress has been made in this area.

In 2010/11, the proportion of children in the reach area achieving at least 78 points across the Early Years Foundation Stage has increased from 31.5% to 47.8% and the gap between the highest and the lowest achieving children has reduced from 33% to 25.5%.

The centre offers a range of parenting skills classes, including baby massage, baby signing and the Triple P parenting programme. Parents who receive support with managing difficult behaviour comment that 'home life is so much calmer'. Although parents come from a range of different backgrounds, they get on well together. Children at the 'Tuesday Tots' group learn to play together and to share, while their parents exchange parenting tips. All parents, including fathers, participate in the session. One parent commented on how their shy child had developed – 'it's lovely to see how he has come on.'

Parents make a good contribution to the running of the centre. There is an active and articulate parent's network which makes recommendations for courses and improvements as well as raising funds. One member of the network sits on the advisory board. Parents are

consulted at every session and there is a suggestion board on which they write comments. Parents say that the centre listens to them and that changes have been made as a result of their suggestions.

These are the grades for the outcomes for families:

The extent to which children, including those from target groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles	2
The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	2
The extent to which all children and parents, including those from target groups, enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	2
The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships, and parents, including those from target groups, contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	2
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents, including those from target groups, are developing economic stability and independence including access to training and employment.	3

How good is the provision?

2

Provision for children and families is good. The children's centre has a clear understanding of its reach area and the needs of its users and accurately identifies target groups. All contact with parents is recorded and the centre can demonstrate that it is effectively reaching these groups.

The centre receives notification of all new births in its reach area from the health authorities and an outreach worker makes an appointment to visit. This not only enables them to introduce new mothers to the children's centre but also to identify families that might be in need of support. Many parents cite this initial visit as their reason for attending the centre.

The range of adult learning and development offered is satisfactory. Parenting skills courses such as baby massage and baby signing are well attended. However, a recent weaning course proved less popular and attendance at the 'Boogie Babies' exercise class declined sharply. The centre is now reconsidering the target audiences and lengths of courses. A gardening club, which proved successful over the summer, has been discontinued for the winter months, to the dismay of some parents.

Families are provided with good support. The centre has supported some families who have undergone extremely traumatic experiences and has achieved good results through effective multi-agency working. One parent simply said, 'If not for the children's centre, who knows where we would be.'

As a result of recently improved professional relationships, health visitors and social workers now involve the children's centre in cases at an early stage, sometimes passing the case over to them entirely. These relationships have been enhanced by the introduction of joint training sessions for staff from different organisations so that all professionals are working to common standards.

These are the grades for the quality of provision:

The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	2
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups	3
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups.	2

How effective are the leadership and management?

2

Leadership and management are good overall, although governance arrangements are only satisfactory. Due to the recent reorganisation of children's centres, management structure and procedures are still relatively new; however, the local authority management structure is fully functional and provides the centre with clear leadership and support.

Evaluation and target-setting are good. As a result of restructuring, the centre has two development plans, one for the centre and its activities and one for outreach work. Staff are given clear and specific quarterly targets which are effectively monitored at regular supervision sessions; the reviews also identify training requirements for staff which are appropriately dealt with. The management team uses data effectively to accurately assess the strengths and weakness of the centre. It realises that a unified plan would be helpful and has started to prepare one for the coming year.

A particular strength of the centre is the way in which all staff work closely with other professionals. They are represented at weekly multi-agency meetings where families in need of additional support are discussed and cases allocated. As a result, they have gained the confidence of colleagues in social care and health, who are now happy to refer families to the centre. This has resulted in families being helped faster and more effectively.

Safeguarding of children and/or vulnerable adults is good. There is a comprehensive child protection policy in place and staff have received appropriate child protection training. All staff have had enhanced Criminal Record Bureau checks and the information has been recorded in the Single Central Register. An electronic access control system and a rigorously enforced signing in procedure ensure the safety of staff and users.

A high proportion of families have issues of domestic violence. One outreach worker is currently trained to identify and respond to this and has provided victims with a good level of support. Because of her heavy caseload, all other outreach staff are scheduled to complete the training.

The centre supports children with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their families well. The special educational needs coordinator works with the childcare provision to develop individual education plans while the outreach workers offer parenting advice and support.

Equality is promoted well and diversity is celebrated throughout the centre. Although there are few members from minority ethnic communities in the reach area, they have integrated well into the centre. The centre has also ensured that toys and displays represent the multicultural nature of society. Fathers are welcome at all sessions. One commented that he was 'a bit nervous at first, but soon opened up'. Grandparents, too, take part in activities, enabling them to pass on advice to younger parents.

The centre provides good value for money. By sharing caseloads with other professionals, staff ensure that there is no duplication of effort. Outreach staff each focus on a particular speciality, which results in an efficient use of resources. Whenever possible, staff deliver services themselves rather than commissioning them from outside providers at additional cost.

These are the grades for leadership and management:

The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day-to-day management arrangements are clear and understood	3
The effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secures improvement in outcomes	2
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	2
The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties	2
The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults	2
The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services provided by the centre to meet its core purpose	2
The extent to which the centre supports and encourages families in the reach area to engage with services and uses their views to develop the range of provision.	2

Any other information used to inform the judgements made during this inspection

None

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Bede/St Mary's Children's Centre on 23 and 24 January 2012. We judged the centre as good overall with some satisfactory aspects.

During our inspection, we spoke to many of you as well as to the centre management and staff, members of the advisory board and some of the other professionals who work in the centre. Please accept our thanks for your help and cooperation.

You spoke very highly of the children's centre and its staff and told us how you feel that the centre has made a real difference to your lives and the lives of your children. We know that the centre has helped some of you through difficult times and that you and your children have made new friendships as a result of centre activities.

The centre has also helped many of you to lead healthier lives, whether by introducing you to healthier eating, by helping you feed your children better or by supporting you to give up smoking. There are regular exercise classes for your children and many of you take advantage of free gym membership and subsidised swimming. The number of mother's breastfeeding their babies has increased and the centre has volunteers to help you with advice and support.

The centre has also helped your children prepare for nursery and school. Some of you took part in the Nursery Rhyme Challenge run together with the library and many of you enjoy reading a book with your children. As a result of the work of the centre, children have better results when they enter nursery and make better progress.

We were impressed by how your parent network participates in the running of the centre, not only by raising funds but by making suggestions for new programmes and activities and for improvements to the building. In fact, you told us that you can all make suggestions through the parent network or the suggestion boards and that the centre listens and acts on them.

You probably know that the way that the centre is run changed last summer and that it is now part of a group of centres. We are pleased to tell you that the new management are doing a good job. They have clear plans for improving the centre and are working hard to make sure that these plans are carried out.

We noticed that the centre is very good at bringing together other professionals, for example from health and social care, to help provide you with support. You will be pleased to know that these professionals spoke very highly of centre staff and the work they are doing. By working together, everyone involved in the centre has achieved good results for families and children with difficulties of various kinds.

We have made three recommendations to the centre. The centre runs a range of courses such as baby massage and baby signing, which are very popular. However, we have noticed that there are no courses which lead to qualifications which might help people find jobs. We have recommended to the centre that they offer some of these courses.

There is a board in the entrance area with job vacancies in the area, but Jobcentre Plus does not help the centre promote employment or training and it does not keep records of who has found work through the centre. Our second recommendation is that Jobcentre Plus works more closely with the centre to ensure that anyone who wants to find a job or training knows what is available.

Members of the cluster advisory board are keen to help the centre develop but feel that they do not know enough about how children's centres work. Our final recommendation is that the local authority offers them training that will help them to carry out their duties.

Once again, many thanks for your help during the inspection. It was a pleasure meeting you all and we wish you every success in the future.

The full report is available from your centre or on our website www.ofsted.gov.uk.