

Inspection report for Wooler Children's Centre

Local authority	Northumberland
Inspection number	383474
Inspection dates	1–2 February 2012
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Centre leader	Jan Casson
Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
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Linked school if applicable	122236 Wooler First School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	301794 Glendale Playgroup
	EY248018 Sure start Day Nursery

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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.

An inspection of the registered early years/childcare provision was carried out at the same time as the inspection of the centre under Section 49 of the Childcare Act 2006. The report of this inspection is available on our website www.ofsted.gov.uk.

An inspection of the co-located/partner primary school was carried out at the same time as the inspection of the centre under Section 5 of the Education Act 2005. The report of this inspection is available on our website www.ofsted.gov.uk

This inspection was carried out by one additional inspector and one early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with senior managers from the centre and the local authority, front-line professionals, parents, volunteers, the chair of the advisory board and a number of partners. Partners included health practitioners, the locality team manager for children's services, representatives from the fire and rescue service, Citizens' Advice Bureau, Jobcentre Plus, the Glendale Trust and the library service.

They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation including key safeguarding information, the centre's self-evaluation form, quarterly performance monitoring and planning, a wide range of case studies and evaluations of individual activities.

Information about the centre

Wooler Children's Centre is one of a cluster of five centres serving a large area of North Northumberland. Wooler itself is a small market town with the surrounding area of Glendale being completely rural. The facilities at Wooler Children's Centre were developed in 2003 as part of the Berwick Sure Start Local Programme and the centre is now a phase one children's centre. All five centres in the area are under the leadership of the programme cluster manager. Wooler and Berwick share the same local advisory board. Staff work across

the whole cluster and the administrative base is at the Wooler site. Governance is provided through Northumberland local authority.

The centre provides the full core of services, working closely with Wooler First School. Wooler Sure Start Day Nursery is on the school site and offers childcare, out-of-school care and crèche provision all year round. A core locality team is employed by the cluster and works alongside a range of partners from the public and voluntary sectors. Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust provides health services. The infant feeding coordinator is partly funded by the cluster. The centre uses a range of venues across the area, including a play bus.

The area is one where the child population is falling and where there are pockets of deprivation. The proportion of children living in households dependant on workless benefits is higher than the national average; many of those in work receive low pay. Traditionally the area is of White British heritage, but in recent years there has been an increasing number of families migrating from Europe, particularly Poland, into the area. Children enter the Early Years Foundation Stage with varying abilities, but for a significant number these are lower than would be expected for their age.

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

1

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

1

Main findings

Wooler Children's Centre is an outstanding centre. One of the many partners said that Wooler Children's Centre 'contributes a sense of hope to this community' and said that the manager 'can see opportunities others don't'. This sums up two of the qualities that contribute to this centre being outstanding. Work is rooted in a complete understanding of the local community and rural issues. The range of partnership working is exceptional and, the sharing of skills and resources has enabled the provision of high quality services that meet local needs to continue after some funding streams have ended. An award winning partnership with the local fire and rescue service, with which the administrative base shares a site, supported the installation of safety equipment and the gym is also used for exercise classes. Other partnerships allow the centre to support the whole community and include the local middle school, the Citizens' Advice Bureau, clergy and the Glendale Trust as well as

health, children's services and Jobcentre Plus. All are extremely positive about the benefits to the community of this way of working.

Leadership and management are exemplary. The programme cluster manager is highly experienced, very knowledgeable about rural issues and continues to be passionate about the work of the centre and making things better for families. There is a strong team who shares a strong vision, commitment and capacity for hard work. Alongside their enthusiasm for what they do, the team demonstrates flexibility and open-mindedness that encourages innovative thinking and allows a quick change of direction if something is found not to be working. For example, in order to reach families early, a family worker attends the local maternity scan clinics, introduces him/herself to mums-to-be, and promotes breastfeeding and smoking cessation at an early stage.

The leadership team has strong organisational systems and access to high quality quarterly data from the local authority, enabling regular rigorous monitoring of performance to take place. This monitoring is supported very ably by the advisory board, which is proactive in reviewing the centre's performance. The parents on the board are confident and articulate. However, other parents are not always sure how to feed their views directly to the advisory board representatives.

All outcomes for children and families are either outstanding or improving rapidly and within this picture breastfeeding stands out as a particular success. Data show that the centre performed within local authority averages as recently as 2009 for sustained breastfeeding after six to eight weeks. This has now reached 66%, which is 30% above local figures. Data also show that over 75% of mothers now initiate breastfeeding and this is high. The breastfeeding coordinator and team of volunteers are enthusiastically committed to enabling new mothers to initiate and sustain breastfeeding. They give potentially isolated mothers personal support and a contact they know will understand their concerns. Most local businesses are now breastfeeding friendly because of encouragement from the centre and the whole ambience in the centre and nursery is highly nurturing.

Systems for supporting vulnerable children are exceptional and involve strong partnership working between services. Highly defined and well-followed protocols ensure that all cases requiring no further input by children's services are, with consent, passed on to the children's centre. Tailored support is then put into place to address each family's needs. The success rate of this intervention is high and only 4% are supported further by children's services. This enables the area to protect children early.

Staff at the centre share a vision to 'go the extra mile' to take away the barriers that lead to economic and social inequality. They share high aspirations with families. This vision underpins all the work of the centre and ensures that, although everyone is welcome, work is targeted towards those groups most in need of support. Current work is very successfully narrowing the achievement gap for children who are actively engaged with the centre. This, combined with excellent leadership and the breadth and quality of partnerships, gives the centre an outstanding capacity for continued improvement.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Formalise systems to enable parents to contact representatives on the local advisory board to ensure that their views are taken into account.

How good are outcomes for families?

1

A wide variety of opportunities to develop healthy lifestyles has been put in place to try to reduce the percentage of children who are overweight at the end of Reception year. These include popular family swimming sessions at low cost, involvement in the 'Get Active Northumbria' initiative and a range of cookery classes to encourage healthy eating. A garden of raised beds is being developed at the front of the fire station to show how easy it is to grow your own fruit and vegetables. As a result of this concerted work with local partners, the percentage of overweight children, although still above the national average, decreased by over four percent in 2011. Most other outcomes related to health are very good; breastfeeding rates are high, no mothers smoked at delivery in the last quarter and immunisations are currently at 100 percent.

Families are encouraged to stay safe and given outstanding help in doing so. Low cost home safety equipment is for sale, all nursery children are issued with high visibility vests and home safety advice is incorporated into the baby massage programme. A locality child safety group looks at current issues and disseminates advice and guidance across the area. Excellent partnership working means that health partners share information about any current safety issues that are emerging.

Emotional health and well-being are also supported extremely well. Classes to support parenting skills and attachment are run from Alnwick, but targeted families are helped to attend. The feedback is overwhelmingly positive and demonstrates that the classes are having a positive impact on families' well-being. One parent said 'I am a lot calmer and happier now' and all commented on how much more confident they were in their ability as parents. A very good working relationship with 'CEASE24' enables victims of domestic violence to receive appropriate help locally and in a venue where they feel secure. Early intervention is very well established and the common assessment framework (CAF) is used well to coordinate support for children and families from a variety of agencies. Vulnerable families are monitored individually so that support is completely responsive to their needs.

The childcare provision is outstanding and children's progress in groups carefully monitored. This helps to contribute to excellent Early Years Foundation Stage Profile outcomes; 73% of children who had attended activities including four out of five children who had been identified as 'children in need' achieved in line with national expectations. All practitioners and family workers are involved in a specific programme for promoting speech and language

skills and have received training from speech and language therapists. Partnership with the library service encourages targeted families to use the library. Strategies to promote inclusion are very successful and the welfare children with additional needs is carefully tracked. This work ensures that the gap between the lowest achieving 20% of children and the majority is narrower than the national average and this represents strong achievement for these children.

The centre is very successful in improving the economic well-being of families and effectively overcome the challenge of the relative isolation of some families. The Citizens' Advice Bureau worker helps families, particularly with housing and benefit issues. This is part of a holistic approach and from a sample of ten families who had received advice, eight said their finances were a lot better and seven that they worried less about money, therefore reducing stress. The centre has helped set up and promote a credit union in the local area further enhancing the future economic well-being of families. Close relationships with Jobcentre Plus effectively promote local employment opportunities. Trying to develop new skills is a priority and the cookery courses supported by the Glendale Trust could eventually lead to parents developing their own small businesses. Opportunities for adult learning and training almost inevitably involve travel, but informative and well-recorded case studies show that young people and adults have attained qualifications and successfully gone on to study further.

Behaviour and relationships are very good throughout. A relaxed atmosphere and an ability to listen means that everyone feels confident to express their views. Parents are regularly consulted and encouraged to become volunteers and to be part of the decision making process, although the route for this is not clear to all parents. The Rural Action Group in Belford allows parents from that community to feed their views in to the centre. Children are carefully listened to by key workers and provision is carefully tailored to respond to their needs.

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	1
The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	1
The extent to which all children and parents, including those from target groups, enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	1
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	1
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.	1

How good is the provision?

A creative and flexible approach ensures a high level of service in an area of low population and long distances to travel with limited public transport. Currently over 90% of families in the reach area are registered with the centre and 72% have attended an activity this year. Both universal and targeted services meet the core offer. Everyone is welcomed and given help in deciding what would best meet their needs. Parents are encouraged to try 'Brilliant Babies' as a first, universal course giving a taster of other activities on offer. Activities often run alongside each other to reduce the number of journeys needed. The use of a wide range of local venues again helps reduce the problems associated with travel.

Opportunities for play and learning are limited in the wider area and parents are overwhelming in their commendation for the activities offered to children by the children's centre. The flexibility, friendliness and good communication of the team are repeatedly praised. These qualities, alongside a commitment to improvement of qualifications and access to further training enable staff to make a big difference to the experiences available to children and families in the community. There is a similar commitment to supporting the personal development and learning of parents and those spoken to are proud of their own achievements.

Vulnerable families are identified at an early stage and give highly sensitive and appropriate support. Family workers are described as 'amazing' and parents appreciate their support and guidance throughout pregnancy, breastfeeding, and well beyond. For example, fuel and food are provided for families in severe need when necessary.

The centre is constantly trying to improve its service and to reach more families. 'Play in the Street' takes the play bus into communities after school and helps to make more families aware of centre services. Detailed and accessible information and sign posting to other services complement the work of the centre and enable more families to be supported.

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	1
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups	1
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups.	1

How effective are the leadership and management?

1

The impressive range and quality of partnerships contribute an added dimension that helps to make this centre special. The centre's approach to inclusion is a particular strength. A local inclusion support team works at a strategic level to offer frontline professional advice and support and ensures that this is always available, sometimes via a telephone helpline. Everyone is welcome at the centre, but the team goes out of its way to contact individual families who may be more hesitant about coming. Disabled children and those from ethnic minority groups are very well supported and their well-being carefully monitored and the centre has contact with all in its reach. A Polish Saturday club in Berwick is well supported by the centre and the families are valued for what they bring to the area. There is also a thriving fathers' group, which receives excellent evaluations from those who attend. All statutory requirements in relation to equality and diversity are met very well and this enables the centre to support all families to a high standard.

Procedures for safeguarding are highly effective. A very comprehensive range of policies and procedures is in place including extremely thorough and detailed recruitment and protecting children procedures. Training is given high priority and, through regular staff supervision, kept at the forefront of everyone's thinking. Early intervention and support for vulnerable families, partnerships to tackle domestic violence and related issues and the work to establish financial stability are all tackled vigorously by a dedicated multi-agency approach. This approach contributes to the centre's success in preventing problems escalating.

Parents access all aspects of the centre's provision and parental satisfaction surveys currently show 100% satisfaction with centre services and this is reflected in parents' comments. Activities are evaluated as they take place and centre users' comments valued. Groups have often been moved to different days or venues in response to feedback from parents. Parents are well represented on the advisory board, but some expressed a need for clearer channels through which to contact these representatives to enable their views to be taken into account. The advisory board membership reflects the complete range of partnerships that drive the work of the centre.

Governance and systems of accountability are fully embedded and involve a wide range of partners. Strategic level discussions ensure duplication of services is avoided. Excellent access to and understanding of data underpins rigorous self-evaluation at all levels and this enables an excellent programme of services to be provided, fully meeting the needs of all families. The complete partnership approach across services combined with thorough financial monitoring contributes to the centre providing outstanding value for money.

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	1
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The effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secures improvement in outcomes	1
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	1
The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties	1
The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults	1
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	1
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.	1

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

Glendale Playgroup and the Sure Start Day Nursery were inspected concurrently and the finding from these inspections were made available to this team.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Wooler Children's Centre on 1 and 2 February 2012. We judged the centre as outstanding overall.

During the inspection we observed activities and talked to some of you and the professionals who work in your centre. We looked at action plans and documents including comments and photographs from the various groups. We also visited the childcare nursery and went to Alnwick to visit a session of a parenting programme.

Everyone we talked to was very enthusiastic about the children's centre and the difference it has made for you. We heard the words 'amazing' and 'brilliant' lots of times. We were particularly impressed by how well the centre leadership understands the problems of living in a rural area. They really do know how difficult it can be when there is only one local supermarket and it has very little fresh fruit left or getting to visit someone in hospital when the round trip is 80 miles. They all work hard to make sure that activities are where you can get to them and give some of you a lot of individual support when it is needed. Time and again we were told that if something was not working to try another way of doing it and we were given lots of examples where this was exactly what had happened.

We both thought that the way all the professionals in the area work together to make things happen was 'brilliant'. We found out about how the fire service helps fit home safety equipment and about how family workers come to the scan clinics to tell expectant mums about the centre. We also heard how when families are really in need of support, everyone works together to make it happen quickly to prevent the problem getting any worse. We saw an excellent example of a family being helped like this while we were at your centre. On a more everyday level this working together has huge benefits in the range of activities that can be delivered locally, for example when the youth hostel is used for 'Cookery from Scratch' or the middle school used the 'play bus'.

There were so many wonderful things going on, it is difficult to pick just a few. Breastfeeding is a huge success story. A few years ago it was no better than elsewhere in the county, but it is now much better. Some of you work alongside the breastfeeding

coordinator and with her you have helped many other mums to feed their babies themselves. You have also persuaded local businesses that it is a good idea and the whole feel now is of somewhere that is breastfeeding friendly. Before the children's centre there were very few opportunities for your children to play together. There is now plenty available, mainly linked to the outstanding nursery. You happily told us how fantastic they are and again the word 'flexible' kept being used about how it works. The Citizens' Advice Bureau helps you to sort out problems with benefits, money or housing. This helps you to worry less and be less stressed when managing your family. There are lots of other examples of good things the centre does that we could have used.

All the staff at the centre 'go the extra mile' to make things happen and to make sure that everyone has a chance to do well. They believe strongly that everyone deserves the best and do their utmost to make sure you all get it. This makes it important when you tell them how well they are doing or suggest things that could be done differently. A small number of you are members of the advisory board and help in the running of the centre. We have asked that it be made clear how the rest of you can contact these representatives when you need to.

We enjoyed visiting such a strong centre and are sure that it will continue to offer you an outstanding service in the future. Thank you to everyone who took the time to come and speak to us. We are very grateful and hope you will continue to value your centre as special, the way you do now.

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