

# Inspection report for Ashington Children's Centre

Local authority	Northumberland
Inspection number	362432
Inspection dates	8–9 December 2010
Reporting inspector	Jayne Utting HMI

Centre governance	Action for Children
Centre leader	Gillian Physick
Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
Centre address	Alexandra Road, Ashington, Northumberland, NE63 9EF
Telephone number	01670 819988
Fax number	Not applicable
Email address	mig.freeman@actionforchildren.org.uk

Linked school if applicable	Not applicable
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	EY314465

The inspection of this Sure Start Children's Centre was carried out under Part 3A of the Childcare Act 2006 as inserted by section 199 of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009.

## 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 3 of the Childcare Act 2006. The report of this inspection is available on our website [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk).

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an early years inspector.

The inspectors visited a range of provision across the centre. They also held meetings with senior managers from the centre, parents and carers, members of the advisory board and a number of partners including Early Years Foundation Stage and childcare partners; health, education and children's social care professionals and representatives from Barnardos, NEWS and Jobcentre Plus.

They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

## Information about the centre

Ashington Children's Centre is located in the south east of Northumberland. It covers a number of wards, the vast majority of which fall within the top 10% of deprived wards in the country. The reach population of the centre is just over 1400. Recent figures show that over 37% of households are lone parents with dependent children. Estimated weekly income is significantly lower than the Northumberland average, and the percentage of children aged nought to four living in households dependent on workless benefits is over 45%. The majority of local families are of White British heritage. The proportion of children attending schools in the area who are known to be eligible for free school meals is well above the national average, as is the proportion of children aged under four who are living in households where no one is working. Most children enter childcare and early education with a much narrower range of experiences and skills than that expected for their age. The proportion of children with special educational need and/or disabilities, including those with a statement of special educational needs, is above average.

The centre is located in one building, and operates as a 'one-stop-shop' model, providing the full core offer. It opened in 2002 and was developed from a Sure Start Local Programme. The day-to-day management and provision of service delivery at Ashington Children's Centre is the responsibility of Action for Children as part of a contract awarded by Northumberland County Council. The centre hosts a full-time day care provision for children from birth to school age and this is managed by a private provider. The locality manager works across the coastal locality of Northumberland, which comprises two further children's centres. Governance arrangements transferred to an advisory board in 2009.

## 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 users and the wider community**

**2**

### Capacity for sustained improvement

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

**2**

## Main findings

'Supportive, welcoming, confidence building and enjoyable' are words used frequently by parents and carers to describe the impact Ashington Children's Centre has had on their lives. This well-established centre sits at the heart of the community it serves and continues to work hard to build up trust and respect amongst local families. The support, dedication and commitment of all centre staff and partner services has ensured that the life chances of people living within this locality are improving, often in the face of the most challenging of circumstances.

Provision is good, both in relation to the high quality activities delivered within the centre, and the outreach work carried out by health professionals and family support staff. The importance the centre gives to reaching out into the community and developing positive relationships with all users is the foundation stone of its success. The expertise, knowledge and effective communication demonstrated by all staff within the centre is notable and has ensured the provision of effective support and guidance to all families whom they meet. This is reflected in the fact that parents and carers often have the confidence to ask for help and support; increasingly before they reach a point of crisis.

All staff, partners and volunteers are united in their vision to secure improved outcomes for all families and this is a strength of the centre. A rigorous cycle of

monitoring and evaluation means that the management team remain focussed on improving the quality and impact of the services and activities provided, demonstrating good capacity for improvement. Access to a wealth of information available through the centre's comprehensive database, combined with the support of the senior business support officer and the local authority, greatly enhances the depth of the centre's self analysis. The senior management team realises that there is scope to develop the use of this resource further in order to further enhance the delivery of targeted services; improving outcomes for families, particularly in relation to increasing breastfeeding rates and reducing obesity and the number of people smoking.

An advisory board, which covers the coastal locality of Northumberland, has been established. Members of the board spoken to during the inspection are fully supportive of the work of the centre and are clear about their roles and responsibilities. A well-established cycle of monitoring and evaluation ensures that planning is well targeted and that most advisory board members have the capacity to challenge the impact and progress made by the centre against its targets. However, whilst parents and carers have access to their own 'Parent Forum', they have only recently taken an active role on the advisory board, which limits the extent to which they can effectively contribute to the ongoing developments of the centre they represent. The centre is aware of this and has taken steps to address this.

Safeguarding is given the utmost priority, with exemplary policies and procedures in place to ensure the safety and protection of both families and staff. All staff are confident in their understanding of child protection policies and procedures and are adept at identifying vital signs, referring quickly and appropriately when necessary. This coupled with the centre's flexible approach to service delivery, ensures that the good quality support provided is responsive to the changing needs of the community, and so remains correctly targeted. As a result, equality is promoted sensitively, with robust systems in place to identify and tackle any forms of discrimination identified at a community or multi-agency level.

## **What does the centre need to do to improve further?**

### **Recommendations for further improvement**

- Continue to use available data to further enhance the delivery of targeted services in order to improve outcomes for families, particularly in relation to increasing breastfeeding rates and reducing obesity and the number of people smoking.
- Continue to develop work around participation to ensure parents and carers are empowered to contribute to the governance of the centre through meaningful representation on the advisory board.

## How good are outcomes for users?

2

Described by one parent as 'a real life line,' the centre has effected some real lasting change; improving outcomes for many of the families and children within the locality it serves. Central to its success has been the time taken by the dedicated staff to secure their trust and respect, combined with well established, effective multi-agency partnerships which provide good quality care and support.

The impact of this effective partnership work in relation to the promotion of children's and families' emotional well-being and their physical health is evident across the work of the centre. The commitment of all staff including midwives, health visitors, family support and parent participation workers, ensures that families receive the support they need. The support and advice offered to teenage parents through the 'Mums to Be' group is good and many of the mums involved go on to attend other services offered by the centre. Young dads are also well supported, through the work of the Barnardo's dad's worker. The positive impact of this work is reflected in the increasing number of men who attend activities, many of whom commented on how included they now feel and how much more confidence they have in their very important role as a father. Family support workers use the well attended baby clinics as an opportunity to catch up with parents in a relaxed, informal environment. There are many examples of how this has ensured early intervention in relation to a range of issues including speech and language development; behaviour and post natal depression. The promotion of healthy lifestyles is also well supported through initiatives such as 'Fit 4 Life' and 'Pools for Schools.' This combined with effective partnerships with local health trainers and well attended activities such as Tasty Treats, Cooking for Toddlers, Jolly babies and baby yoga ensures that families are developing a good understanding of how to keep themselves and their children healthy.

A continued focus on the promotion of issues around child safety, combined with productive working partnerships with the local police and fire service has resulted in an increase in the number of parents and carers requesting safety equipment for their homes. At the four month home visit, staff take time to offer practical advice about potential dangers in the home and inform parents of how to minimise these, including signposting to low cost safety equipment schemes. Excellent multi-agency support ensures that children subject to a child protection plan or common assessment framework processes are extremely well supported. Robust procedures and effective protocols between relevant agencies ensure that appropriate information is shared between professionals, with care packages identified to meet need in a consistent and rigorous manner. The effectiveness of this approach is reflected in a reduction in the number of re-referrals.

A close working partnership exists between local early years providers, the centre's qualified teacher and Northumberland's early years consultants. This combined with the centre's ongoing involvement in the 'Every Child a Talker' project has had a significant impact on the achievement of children, particularly in relation to their personal, social and emotional development as well as their communication,

language and literacy skills. The gap between the lowest 20% of children achieving expected levels in key early learning goals, and that for all children in Northumberland has narrowed considerably over the past year. The work of speech and language therapists has also empowered both staff and parents with the knowledge of how to consistently apply good practice in the development of children's communication skills, securing progress in this key area.

Many parents and carers feel they have a voice within the centre through the 'Parents Forum' and that services provided meet their specific needs. For example, the introduction of 'Little Monkeys' drop-in specifically for children under two years. However, there is limited opportunity for them to engage meaningfully in the governance of the centre and to participate in key decision making at this level.

There is some good evidence of how the centre has helped parents and carers into learning, training and employment and there is an improving partnership with the local Jobcentre, in an effort to reduce worklessness across the locality. Effective partnerships with local colleges as well as a comprehensive volunteer programme has enabled many parents to access a range of accredited training opportunities including beauty therapy, essential skills and information and communication technology (ICT) courses. The completion of these courses, has given individuals a real sense of achievement. Many parents and carers told us how their confidence and self-esteem improved as a direct result. The very real impact of this support is clearly evident in the increased aspirations of those we spoke to, many of whom talked about going back to work or completing higher level qualifications.

<b>The extent to which children, including those from vulnerable groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The extent to which all users enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships and users contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents are developing economic stability and independence including access to training</b>	<b>2</b>

## **How good is the provision?**

**2**

All centre staff, partners and the local authority share a good understanding of the issues and challenges facing the community. This ensures well-targeted support for local children and families, helping them to make the best of those opportunities available. The centre can identify numerous examples where families have been

supported, helping them to re-engage in everyday life and enjoy their families again. The work of the centre, particularly with its more vulnerable families is a key strength, a clear reflection of its caring yet expectant ethos. The dedication and commitment of all involved in the centre, ensures a continued focus on community development and engagement. The centre recognises there is still more to do to fully engage some families; however, the distance travelled to reach this point is testament to the quality of the provision offered.

Effective partnerships with local professionals means that the assessment of individual cases is robust and the common assessment framework is successfully implemented ensuring teams can be gathered quickly to support children and families identified as in need. The role of the children's centre in the establishment of effective exit strategies is improving, ensuring parents can build their confidence and parenting skills, supporting them to independence at a pace that is appropriate to them. A focus on developing effective channels of communication has also helped to strengthen multi-agency working and has streamlined processes to ensure that meetings successfully and efficiently identify and assess those children and families who need immediate support.

The shared actions taken to involve and improve outcomes for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities are good. A close working partnership has been established between relevant external agencies and the centre's family support team. This ensures the provision of individualised packages of support. One parent told of the invaluable support she had received and explained how funding from the two year old pilot had enabled her to receive the respite care she needed. One parent attending the centre's 'Little Miracles Group' spoke of how the group 'helped her to get through the day,' whilst others spoke of the 'support and patience' of the centre's support staff especially around issues such as weaning.

A good range of services and activities are designed and delivered through the centre, and reflect the specific needs of the community in which it is based. For example, parents attending the popular drop-in group 'Little Monkeys', spoke fondly of the lasting friendships made and the confidence they had gained, enabling them to try other courses and activities within the centre. This holistic approach to service provision is reflected in the individualised support which is provided for all families and children who access the centre.

Good quality early years provision is also ensuring that the achievement and aspirations of children are raised, a key barrier for many families locally. Each child who accesses the centre has an individual learning journey which tracks their progress and achievements during their time at the setting. The innovative work of the early years qualified teacher both with the day care provision and the centre workers has ensured the application of the principles of the Early Years Foundation Stage into all aspects of their work and has enabled many to better support parents to aid their child's learning at home. This, combined with improved arrangements for transition which involve parents, key workers and school as equal partners, ensures that children are becoming better prepared for this challenge.

Evaluations from individual parents about the quality of support all highlight the difference the work of the centre has made to their own and their children's development and well-being. One parent described her journey from young mother to volunteer, into paid employment and explained how the coordination of support from the centre had ensured she had the confidence to take steps to change the direction of her life, improving not only her life chances but those of her children.

<b>The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all users</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of users and the wider community</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The quality of care, guidance and support offered to users within the centre and the wider community</b>	<b>2</b>

## **How effective are the leadership and management?**

**2**

Governance arrangements are developing well. The centre's management team, advisory board and partners have a clear focus on improvement and roles and responsibilities are clearly set out and understood. There is a coherent link between the Children's Trust, Children and Young People's Plan, and the centre's action plan and as a result, the centre's priorities link effectively to those of the wider area. The centre manager and her deputy work hard to ensure that the profile of the children's centre is raised through representation on a range of local strategic partnerships. Arrangements between Action for Children and the local authority to manage performance are well established.

The centre has made a significant commitment to developing its systems for monitoring and evaluation. The centre's senior management team work with staff and partners to identify future priorities and coherent action plans have been developed as a result. These are based on robust data combined with good local knowledge provided by family support workers, and other relevant partners. A key strength of this data system are the detailed tracking records which enable staff to monitor the progress of individuals as well as specific target groups including; teenage parents, dads, those from workless households, and those with a history of poor mental health or drug and alcohol misuse. This helps to ensure equality of opportunity and to identify potential barriers to access. The centre recognises that work is needed to refine the use of this data in order to further improve outcomes for families, particularly in relation to increasing breastfeeding rates and reducing obesity levels and the number of people smoking. The views of parents and users are collected through evaluations of individual activities and interventions in order to check quality, usefulness and to inform the future planning of provision.



The dedication of all staff and partners within the centre is clearly evident and this is driven by the leadership team's high expectations. Staff recognise there is no quick fix solution and have been resolute in their determination to build solid foundations, ensuring all change is lasting. The performance management of staff is robust and arrangements for appraisal and supervision are thorough with outcomes used to plan training and support staff development. A commitment to the inclusion of all children and families is at the heart of the centre's vision. Clear action plans have been drawn up which reflect specific targets for particular groups of users including fathers, young mothers, those with mental health issues and children with special educational needs and/or disabilities and there has been a marked improvement in the engagement of these groups.

Early intervention and prevention is at the heart of the centre's work. Well-skilled and knowledgeable, all staff and partners have the confidence to identify needs and issues facing families at the earliest opportunity. All have an in-depth knowledge of policies and procedures in relation to safeguarding children, and are confident to follow these as required. Excellent partnership working ensures that the centre is able to offer a cohesive, timely package of integrated services, intervening at the earliest opportunity to prevent situations escalating into crisis. Robust arrangements are in place to ensure that all staff and other professionals who deliver services through the centre are suitable to do so.

Resources are used and managed effectively to meet the needs of families and children in the community. The centre manager and team leaders all work closely with the senior business support officer, ensuring budget allocations are aligned to ongoing priorities and remain responsive to the changing priorities and needs within the local community. Staff are well deployed and utilised ensuring good value for money, the centre manager remaining acutely aware of the need to ensure the long term sustainability of the centre.

<b>The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day to day management arrangements are clear and understood</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which ambitious targets drive improvement, provision is integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of users and the wider community</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults</b>	<b>1</b>

<b>The extent to which evaluation is used to shape and improve services and activities</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services the centre has been commissioned to provide</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which the centre supports and encourages the wider community to engage with services and uses their views to develop the range of provision</b>	<b>2</b>

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

Ashington Children's Centre hosts full-time day care provision for children aged birth to school age and this is managed by a private provider; RASCALS. The following local first schools; Ashington Central, Ashington Wansbeck, Thomas Berwick Campus, Richard Grainger Campus, James Knott Campus, Robert Stephenson Campus and John Dobson Campus, with Early Years Foundation Stage provision for children over three years, are also part of the centre's remit. Information from their most recent Ofsted inspections has been taken into account when writing about early years provision and outcomes for children in this report.

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance 'Complaining about inspections', which is available from our website: [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk). If you would like us to send you a copy of the guidance, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email [enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk).

## **Summary for centre users**

We inspected Ashington Children's Centre on 08 and 09 December 2010. We visited activities, looked at the centre's plans and documents and talked with you and professionals. Following this work, we have judged the centre as providing good support to you and your family.

The children's centre provides a wide range of activities, which are aimed at helping families improve their lives. Your views support this as you tell us that you are happy with the activities you use because they have helped you in lots of different ways. For example, some of you have received good support as young parents, whilst others have found the support for families with children with disabilities 'fantastic' and a 'real lifeline.' In particular, activities and provision for children before they start school is improving across the area and your children are doing better as a result especially in regard to making friends and developing speaking, listening and reading skills.

We found that the children's centre offers lots of programmes and activities aimed at improving the health of people in your local community. In particular, it has done really well in encouraging people to ensure babies get their immunisations, as well as

helping people to live healthier lifestyles through the provision of activities to encourage healthy eating and exercise. However, there is still more work to do to reduce the number of people smoking, the number of children in reception who are overweight, as well as to increase the number of new mums who choose to breastfeed their babies. The centre continues to take action to improve this for the benefit of you and your family.

Most importantly, you tell us that you 'feel safe at the centre,' and can 'trust the staff to help you when you most need it'. You particularly appreciate the support of the family support workers and have welcomed home visits and the opportunity to go with someone to a group until you build your confidence and make new friends. We found that the centre was really good at helping you at times in your life when you most need it. We also found that action was taken quickly and that different people and organisations worked well as a team to support both children and families. However, there are some people who live in your area who do not currently use these facilities. So, staff at your children's centre are developing ways to encourage more families to use the groups and activities they provide, so they can all benefit, if they wish, from the good support available.

We found that the centre is working very well with other partners, such as health visitors, midwives and health trainers. You tell us that it is good to go to the baby clinics and drop-in groups where you have the opportunity to talk to the health visitor or the family support worker in a relaxed, informal environment. For example, one mum had been able to get support for her child who was having trouble with his sleep routine. A lot of parents, especially those who have children with a special educational need and/or disability, told us that they felt happier on the days when they have an activity to go to.

We found that those people in charge of the children's centre are doing a good job. Managers, together with partners and other staff have worked hard to make sure that everything the children's centre does for you will make a difference to the area in which you live. We know that everyone who works with Ashington Children's Centre share this commitment and we heard lots of examples from you about how they are making a real difference to your lives. The centre has access to lots of detailed information to help them plan future activities. We have asked them to continue to develop the ways in which this information is used so that they can continue to improve outcomes for you all. We know the centre is good at asking for your opinion on the activities and services you use. Some of you have used the 'Parents Forum' to influence and change the way some services are delivered. However, the centre needs to increase the involvement and influence you have as parents in their work. We hope that this is something you might be interested in becoming a part of.

Thank you to everyone who took the time to come and speak with us, we are very grateful and we wish you every success for the future.

The full report is available from your centre or on our website [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk).