

Inspection report for Blyth West Children's Centre

Local authority	Northumberland
Inspection number	383636
Inspection dates	24-25 August 2011
Reporting inspector	Jayne Utting HMI

Centre governance	Barnardos
Centre leader	Sharon Dunbar
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Centre address	Devonworth Place Cowpen Blyth Northumberland NE24 5AQ
Telephone number	01670 541150
Fax number	Not applicable
Email address	Sharon.dunbar@barnardos.org.uk

Linked school if applicable	Not applicable
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	EY315732 Barnardos Nursery; EY386980 Bizzy Bees Pre-school; EY319628 Caterpillar Crèche

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.

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

The inspectors visited a range of activities across the centre. They also held meetings with senior managers from the centre, parents, 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 Blyth Valley Arts and Leisure, Northumberland Adult Learning Service, the community safety team and Jobcentre Plus. They observed the centre's work and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

Blyth West Children's Centre is located in the industrial town of Blyth in the south east of Northumberland. Its reach covers five wards, three of which fall within the top 10% of deprived wards in the country. The reach population of the centre is just over 600. Recent figures show that over 38% of households are lone parents with dependent children. Estimated weekly income is significantly lower than the Northumberland average and the percentage of children aged under four years living in households dependent on workless benefits is over 35%. The majority of local families are of White British heritage with small pockets of Black and minority-ethnic populations. The proportion of children in the area that are known to be eligible for free school meals is well above the national average. 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 needs and/or disabilities, including those with a statement of special educational needs, is above average.

The centre opened in 2003 and is located in one building and operates as a 'one-stop-shop' model providing the full core offer. The day-to-day management and

provision of service delivery at Blyth West Children’s Centre is the responsibility of Barnardos 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, a pre-school and a crèche. There is a dedicated centre lead as well as a locality manager who works across the Blyth Valley area of Northumberland. This comprises of four further children’s centres. Activities are delivered across these centres. Supervisory arrangements transferred to an advisory board in 2010.

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

‘I have gained so much more confidence in myself and am able to take positive steps forward with my life.’ This is how one parent described the impact Blyth West Children’s Centre has had on her life. Centre staff have been proactive in establishing many effective multi-agency partnerships. This has ensured they remain responsive to the needs of local families. However, some partnerships are at an earlier stage of development and this has impacted on outcomes in relation to the promotion of ongoing economic well-being.

The provision of support for parents experiencing domestic violence and/or substance misuse is a particular strength. Facilitated through effective partnerships with local organisations such as Cease 24, activities are helping parents to develop positive relationships with their children. Parental evaluations of courses such as ‘Parent Factor’, for individuals on a drug treatment programme, and ‘Freedom’, for those who have suffered domestic violence, show how successful these have been in helping to raise self-esteem. One parent who attended the ‘Freedom’ programme said that she was now more aware of what to look out for in her relationships and felt more able to keep herself and her children safe. Support for teenage parents is also good. By working in partnership with a local Barnardos project ‘The Point,’ the centre is able to provide a locally based, dedicated service that provides good early opportunities for teenage parents to engage in a good range of activities. Parents who attended both the ‘young parents to be’ and ‘tots to teens’ groups commented positively on the wide range of information they had been provided with.

The centre has a genuine inclusive ethos and clear targets have been set to support the most vulnerable families through increasingly effective multi-agency working and well targeted outreach provision. The positive impact of some of this work is reflected in the increasing number of parents who attend the centre's 'Culture Club', a group established a year ago to provide activities for the community's Black and minority-ethnic families. Detailed delivery plans highlight good strategies to overcome barriers to participation faced by some families in the locality, particularly those from workless households, lone parents and fathers. Whilst registrations for these targeted groups have increased steadily over the past 12 months, the centre needs to improve their levels of participation in centre activities further.

The approach to assessing the individual needs of children and their parents is effective. This makes a significant contribution to ensuring outcomes for families are good. Parents and carers told us that they particularly value the wide range of provision that the centre offers and feel that their ideas and opinions are taken into consideration when shaping services. The overt action taken as a result of feedback has promoted trust with users of the services. The volunteer and peer support training programmes as well as the befriender project has encouraged those within the community to act as ambassadors for the service, equipping them with the skills to support others who may have faced similar challenges to themselves.

The centre benefits from a strong senior leadership team and the local authority provides a robust quality-assurance role. Leaders have a clear and focused vision to make a real, lasting difference to this community. The added value the partnership with Barnardos brings to the service as a whole is clearly evident. This ensures that the centre has good capacity to build on its successes to date and further improve outcomes for all families locally.

Safeguarding is given the utmost priority with highly effective, robust policies and procedures in place to ensure the safety and protection of both families and staff. All staff demonstrate an excellent understanding of child protection policies and procedures and are adept at identifying vital signs, referring quickly and appropriately when necessary. Parents are also very clear as to the responsibilities of the children's centre in relation to child protection. This, along with some exemplary partnerships, ensures a seamless and coordinated approach to safeguarding children.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Further improve the engagement of families from workless households, lone parents and fathers.
- Improve the participation of parents/carers in training and adult education programmes through the continued development of partnerships with Jobcentre Plus and Northumberland Adult Learning Services and the provision of additional introductory training programmes that better meet the needs and interests of families within the locality.

How good are outcomes for users?

2

Blyth West Children's Centre has effected some genuine changes, improving outcomes for some of its local parents and children. 'It has made me really think about the way I parent my kids and how I can improve this.' stated one parent, whilst others commented on how very differently their life would have turned out if it had not been for the help and support of centre staff.

The conspicuous impact of effective partnership working with health professionals has been vital to the improved outcomes seen across several of the key health indicators. The promotion of healthy lifestyles threads through every activity within the centre. For example, the establishment of a local community garden has afforded families the opportunity to grow their own vegetables. Without exception, parents that the inspectors spoke to showed an increased awareness of the importance of staying fit and healthy. As part of its pursuit to ensure a whole family commitment to a healthy lifestyle the centre has worked closely with the 'Get Active Northumberland' project, with encouraging results for those choosing to participate. The work undertaken in relation to the promotion of smoking-cessation strategies is also beginning to successfully change local attitudes. The effective support provided by professionals has contributed to a 14.6% reduction in the number of mothers smoking at delivery. The centre has also effected some real change in relation to the promotion of oral health. Registrations with dentists have increased by over 50%, with Barnardos Nursery achieving the gold award as part of the National 'ChildSmiles' project. Finally, the establishment of a number of 'stay and play' type sessions has alleviated the sense of isolation felt by a number of mums in the locality. These provide a much needed place to meet other parents and carers as well as the opportunity to share experiences.

An ongoing commitment to the promotion of issues around child safety has resulted in an increase in the number of parents and carers requesting home safety assessments and accessing the centre's low-cost safety equipment scheme. This is facilitated further by the productive working partnerships that exist with the community safety teams. The centre lead for health takes an active role on the accident prevention sub-group. This ensures that the centre has access to up-to-date information on the key causes of accidents locally. The centre was able to use this information to best effect recently, targeting the messages given during their child safety week around prevention of burns and scalds, particularly from hair straighteners. Admission rates of children aged under four years into accident and emergency remain below the Northumberland average. The centre is also proactive in ensuring that children subject to a child protection plan or the Common Assessment Framework processes are well supported. Regular meetings between the Family and Children's Trust (FACT) manager and the health lead ensures that appropriate information is shared between professionals, with care packages identified to meet individual need in a consistent and rigorous manner.

The combined work of the early years consultant and the early years lead has had a

significant impact on achievement. The proportion of children achieving at expected levels has improved at a greater rate than that for Northumberland as a whole and is now above the National average at 56.4%. The centre continues to embrace the ethos of the 'Every Child a Talker' project and this work has had a clear impact on the development of children's communication skills. The work of the early years team and consultants continues to ensure the provision of good education and learning experiences for all children. Through a detailed analysis of local foundation stage profile data, the early years team has ensured the provision of a stay and play group to further improve the achievements of children in specific areas of the community.

Many parents and carers, including young mums and lone parents, commented on how their confidence as parents has improved as a result of their participation in the activities offered by the centre. Parents and carers who sit on the locality's Advisory Board have felt particularly empowered through their inclusion in recent training on roles and responsibilities of board members. This is a reflection of the importance the centre places on ensuring these key partners are able to contribute in a meaningful way. This year's summer programme was also put together by a group of local parents, a good example of how parents and carers are encouraged to play a role in the shaping of services offered.

The centre can demonstrate some success in relation to supporting parents and carers to improve their economic well-being. The work of the part-time 'Learning and Work' advisor and the volunteer coordinator are particularly effective, both of whom have successfully supported a small number of parents, including some lone parents, back into employment and/or training. Whilst partnerships with Jobcentre Plus and Northumberland Adult Learning Service are established, these are less well developed and, as a result, there is currently only a satisfactory range of adult learning classes available with a relatively low take-up rate. As a result not enough use is being made of the good facilities available within the centre in order to provide more 'taster type' introductory training that would better suit the already identified needs and interests of the centre's users. The centre has good plans in place to address this issue for further development.

These are the grades for the outcomes for users

The extent to which children, including those from vulnerable 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 users 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 users contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	2

The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents are developing economic stability and independence including access to training	3
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How good is the provision?

2

Participation rates in activities have been variable but are improving because the centre is making sure that they are better at meeting the range of needs and interests of the community. A significant amount of work has been undertaken in the past year in relation to targeting specific groups such as teenage parents, children with additional needs and those families from Black and minority-ethnic groups. This has resulted in 100% engagement by these specific groups. However, there is more work to be undertaken to further improve the engagement of families from workless households, lone parents and fathers. The targeted work of the family support team ensures a continued focus on community development and engagement and recent case studies show the positive impact of this. Whilst the centre recognises that there is still more to do to fully engage some members of the community, the distance travelled to reach this point is testament to the quality of the provision offered.

The shared actions taken to involve and improve outcomes for children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are good. The centre was instrumental in the establishment of a support group for parents of children with additional needs. Evaluations by parents who attend the 'Little Treasures' group highlight the benefit this has had, particularly through the provision of an opportunity for parents to meet others in a similar situation, reducing their sense of isolation. The centre's pre-school and nursery both offer good provision which supports the specific needs of its children. The real impact of this support is reflected in the fact the some parents opt for their children to remain in the pre-school for some additional time before moving on to statutory provision. The centre's 'Ready for Reception' transition program, specifically for those children with speech and language difficulties, is a further example of the quality of the centre's work in relation to this target group of children and families.

The provision of good quality learning experiences is raising the achievements and aspirations of local children. The early years consultant has worked with staff to improve systems to track the progress and achievements of children. The consistent implementation of the 'progress matters' system has ensured the provision of an accurate record of each child's individual learning journey. By tracking a number of children through to the end of their Reception Year the centre has been able to demonstrate the very real impact of its work. Results showed that 74% of children who had accessed provision at the centre achieved expected or better outcomes in their Foundation Stage Profile results.

The centre has been proactive in developing effective partnerships with the local FACT team. This has helped to ensure that the centre is aware of any families known

to be 'at risk' within the locality. This work has helped to streamline processes to ensure that meetings successfully and efficiently identify and assess those children and families who need immediate support. As a result the centre has secured the registrations of all but two of these families and has worked directly with over 70%. The centre uses the Common Assessment Framework as its primary assessment tool. This has ensured that the assessment of individual cases is robust and that teams can be gathered quickly to support children and families identified as being in need. The role of the children's centre in the establishment of effective exit strategies is improving, ensuring that more parents are able to build their confidence and parenting skills, supporting them to independence at a pace that is appropriate to them. Sensitive, individualised and tailored support is therefore provided to all families who access the centre. In recognition of this best practice in relation to information, advice and guidance the centre has achieved the nationally recognised Matrix award.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

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

How effective are the leadership and management?

2

The senior management team, advisory board and partners have a clear focus on improvement with roles and responsibilities 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. As a result the centre's priorities link effectively to those of the wider area. The interface between the centre's targets and those set in addition by Barnardos clearly adds value to the overall effectiveness of the centre. Senior leaders work hard to ensure that the profile of the children's centre is raised through representation on a range of strategic partnerships. Each centre lead has responsibility for one of the 'Every Child Matters' outcomes, which facilitates an in-depth knowledge and understanding of priorities not just for the locality as a whole, but for the specific work to be undertaken by individual centres. The local authority is effective in providing robust challenges through regular meetings with the Children's Centre Improvement Partner and their senior information officer as well as through the annual conversation.

The centre has made a noticeable commitment to developing its systems for monitoring and evaluation. The senior management team work with staff and

partners to identify future priorities and effective delivery plans have been developed as a result. These are based on robust local data combined with good local knowledge provided by front-line staff. The views of parents and carers are collected through evaluations of individual activities and interventions in order to check quality, usefulness and to support improvements. These are also taken into account when undertaking budget planning. As a result resources are targeted for maximum effect. For example, through the provision of additional nursery nurse hours in a local GP practice where breastfeeding prevalence rates were particularly low.

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. Staff are extremely motivated and committed in all aspects of their professional development. Their good mix of skills, qualifications and knowledge ensures the provision of a holistic service to centre users. Individual strengths are recognised and used to develop services further. All have an in depth knowledge of policies and procedures in relation to safeguarding children and are confident to follow these as required. Robust financial management systems are in place to monitor day-to-day expenditure and delegation of responsibility for resources is at an appropriate level to ensure timely and effective packages of support. Staff are well deployed and utilised ensuring good value for money, the centre lead and locality manager remain aware of the need to ensure the long-term sustainability of the centre.

A commitment to the inclusion of all children and families is at the heart of the centre's vision. Clear action plans reflect ambitious targets for particular groups of users including fathers, those living in workless households and lone parents. Whilst the centre has been increasingly successful in registering individuals from these target groups, there is more work to be done to improve their ongoing participation in the good quality facilities and activities offered by the centre. Effective partnership working, including with health visitors, the FACT team, Blyth Valley Arts and Leisure and local community groups adds value to the work of the centre. The award winning 'First Birthday' event offers a first-rate example of integrated work with partners working together to introduce families to the wealth of good opportunities offered through the centre including advice on weaning, healthy eating, speech and language development, oral health promotion and advice on accessing training and employment opportunities.

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	2
The extent to which ambitious targets drive improvement, provision is integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community	2
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of users and the wider community	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	1
The extent to which evaluation is used to shape and improve services and activities	2
The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services the centre has been commissioned to provide	2
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	2

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

Blyth West Children's Centre hosts a full-time day-care provision (Barnardos Nursery) for children from birth to school age. In addition Bizzy Bees Pre-school and Caterpillar crèche, also managed by Barnardos, are located within the centre. Five local primary schools: Horton Grange; Malvins Close; Newsham; The Dales; and St Andrews, 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.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected Blyth West Children's Centre on 24 and 25 August 2011. We visited a number of activities, looked at the centre's plans and documents and talked with you, centre staff and staff from a range of support organisations. We have judged the centre as providing good support to you and your family.

Some of the things that the centre is doing really well include the activities and support offered to families who have children with special educational needs and/or disabilities as well as the good quality of care, guidance and support offered by those staff who work with you. 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 mums, whilst others have found the opportunities to undertake programmes such as 'Freedom' to be 'invaluable' and 'life changing.' 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.

The children's centre offers lots of programmes and activities aimed at improving the health of people in your local community. We saw for ourselves how much you valued the new kitchen garden project. In addition, the centre has been successful in encouraging families to take good care of their teeth, including registering with a dentist locally. There has also been a reduction in the number of admissions to accident and emergency, with centre activities promoting good safety messages.

Most importantly, you tell us that you, 'feel safe at the centre,' and can, 'trust the staff'. You particularly appreciate the advice and help 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 good at helping people in their lives when they most need it. Action was taken quickly by the centre, with different people and organisations working well together. However, whilst many in your community have registered with the centre, there are some people who do not currently participate in the good quality activities offered. We have asked the staff at the children's centre to continue developing ways to encourage more families to use the groups and activities they provide so they all can benefit if they wish from the good support available.

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 Blyth West Children's Centre shares this view. The centre has access to lots of detailed information to help them plan future activities and we know they listen to you because you enjoy attending activities they provide. Whilst several of you have supported the centre as volunteers and peer support workers, the take up rates for training and adult education programmes remains low. The centre are looking at offering a range of shorter, introductory courses, which we hope you will find interesting and choose to take part in.

We know the centre is good at asking you to tell them how you have found all the activities and groups you attend. Some of you also use the area group meetings and 'chill and chat' sessions to influence and change the way some services are delivered. We were particularly impressed by the summer programme which we know some of you were instrumental in developing. We hope you enjoyed the trip to 'Adventure Valley' on Thursday.

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

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