

South Northamptonshire Children's Centre Group

Towcester Children's Centre, Towcester Community Centre, Islington Rd, Towcester, NN12 6AU

Inspection date 18–20 June 2013

Overall effectiveness	This inspection:	Requires improvement	3
	Previous inspection:		
		Not previously inspected	
Access to services by young children and families		Requires improvement	3
The quality of practice and services		Requires improvement	3
The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management		Requires improvement	3

Summary of key findings for children and families

This children's centre group requires improvement. It is not good because:

- A minority of families from some target groups, such as workless families and male carers, are registered with the centre group and using services. The centre group does not receive good-quality data from the local authority about families living in temporary housing, Travellers, families experiencing domestic violence and adults experiencing mental health difficulties who live in the local area. As a result, centres are not able to target services effectively on these local residents.
- The centre group is not able to demonstrate that it is having a good enough impact upon breastfeeding at six to eight weeks or rates of obesity. They are not doing enough to ensure children are well prepared for school.
- Not enough parents are involved in the advisory board and family forums.
- Although information provided by the local authority to the centres about local children subject to a child protection plan is improving, it is not always regular and of a consistent high quality.
- The local authority's annual discussion with the centre group in 2013 does not provide centre leaders with enough challenge to ensure that all targets are specific and measurable.

This children's centre group has the following strengths:

- The centres have significantly increased their engagement of local families during the three years of their operation so that a large majority of young children outside the target groups are registered, and a majority have accessed services at least once. Families feel less isolated because of the centres' work.
- Within centre-led groups, staff are a good example to families of how to interact with children and with adults. Outcomes for those who participate in centre activities are good.
- All centre staff listen to what parents and children think of the activities that are provided. Consequently, parents who use services feel valued and listened to.
- The group of centres is improving because leaders are determined and focused and are improving their planning, tracking and evaluation processes. Some good partnerships are starting to make a

difference to services. Staff have high morale and are managed and supported well.

Information about this inspection

The inspection of this children's centre group was carried out under Part 3A of the Childcare Act 2006 as amended by the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009. The centres that form part of this children's centre group are Bugbrooke Children's Centre, Deanshanger Children's Centre, Middleton Cheney Children's Centre, Roade Children's Centre and Towcester Children's Centre .

This inspection was carried out by three of Her Majesty's Inspectors and one additional inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with staff, leaders, partners, representatives of the advisory board, Action for Children and the local authority. The inspectors visited each of the centres. They observed the centre's work, spoke informally with parents and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Inspection team

Tim Vaughan, Lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Joy Law	Her Majesty's Inspector
Sue Mann	Her Majesty's Inspector
Georgina Beasley	Additional inspector

Full report

Information about the group

South Northamptonshire Children's Centre Group consists of five centres that share one overall centre leader and one advisory board. Each centre has its own family forum. The centre group is managed by Action for Children under contract to the local authority. Centres provide a range of family support, adult learning and health promotion activities and signpost families to other relevant services. Children start early education with a range of skills that are either below or broadly in line with those expected.

The centre group serves 3,543 children under four years of age living within 39 super output areas. None of these areas are ranked in the top 30% poorest areas in the country and some parts of the area are among the most affluent. At 9%, the proportion of young children living in households where no one is working is well below the national average. Rural isolation is a key challenge for families, and the area served by the centre group covers more than 70 different villages and towns across many square miles. The journey time between centres can take up to 30 minutes by car. The area consists mainly of White British families with a very small number of families from minority ethnic groups.

All five centres in the group were designated as phase three centres between January and March 2010 and share buildings with other community provision. Bugbrooke Children's Centre is on the site of Bugbrooke Community Primary School. Deanshanger Children's Centre is on the site of a community centre. Middleton Cheney Children's Centre is located with the local public library. Roade Children's Centre is located with The Elizabeth Woodville School. Towcester Children's Centre is located with the local community centre. None of the schools were inspected as part of this inspection, their reports are available at www.ofsted.gov.uk.

What does the group need to do to improve further?

- Improve access by young children and families by:
 - ensuring the centre group receives good-quality data and uses this effectively to identify and target services at those families living in the area who are most in need of support, especially those who are Travellers or those living in temporary housing, experiencing domestic violence or mental health difficulties
 - working with partners to develop and embed strategies that will result in a large majority of families from target groups registering with centres and using services.
- Improve the quality and impact of services by working closely with:
 - health partners to increase the rate of breastfeeding at six to eight weeks and to reduce obesity rates among children in the Reception Year
 - early years practitioners and partners to ensure there is a clear focus on reducing the gaps in the attainment of different groups of children so that all children are prepared well to move on to school.
- Improve leadership, governance and management by:
 - increasing the involvement of parents in the advisory board and family forums
 - improving the quality and consistency of information provided to the centre by the local authority about local children subject to a child protection plan
 - improving the quality of challenge given to the centre by the local authority through the annual discussion about priorities so that all centre targets are specific and measurable.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Requires improvement

- Currently 68% of eligible families are registered with the centre group and 54% are reported to have some engagement with centre activities. Centre staff also give good support to other families at activities led by partner organisations (which are not included in these figures). However, only a minority of children and adults from target groups take up children's centre services.
- The quality of data provided to, and collected by the group of centres about the make-up of the area is adequate, but does not reflect the needs of some target groups. Staff compensate through working closely with partner organisations so as to increase the centres' knowledge of families in the local area, but there is not enough data about the numbers of families living in temporary housing, Travellers, families experiencing domestic violence and adults experiencing mental health difficulties. This makes it difficult for centres to know if they are reaching as many people as they need to from groups who are often less likely to use services.
- Greater links with health visitors are helping the centres to reach an increasing number of those families expecting children. In 2012-13, 360 parents received new birth packs. Through working with the South Northamptonshire Volunteer Bureau, families who are rurally isolated have been helped to make journeys totalling 2,133 miles to access centre services and health appointments in 2012. The levels of registration and engagement of one-parent families, people from a minority ethnic background, teenage parents and disabled children are increasing across the centres.

The quality of practice and services

Requires improvement

- Gaps in the attainment of different groups of children in the Early Years Foundation Stage have not narrowed sufficiently. While centre activities, including support to local early years settings are contributing to improvement, the centre and partners have not done enough to ensure good outcomes for every child.
- Families benefit from learning about healthy eating, dental hygiene, building relationships with their babies and supporting their children's speech and language. The number of families from vulnerable groups who are accessing one-to-one support and parenting programmes is beginning to increase. Feedback from parents shows that parents benefit from courses about parenting and about first aid. Despite this, the levels of obesity for local Reception Year children are not decreasing sufficiently and levels of breastfeeding are not being sustained well by local mothers
- The centre signposts users appropriately to relevant training courses, with particular success for teenage parents remaining or returning to education, employment and training. However, outcomes for adults are not tracked effectively and, consequently, it is difficult for the centre to demonstrate the impact of this work.
- Centre leaders carefully consider parents' views and use this information well to inform centre planning. As a consequence, parents feel that their views matter and can talk about ways in which the centre has responded to their comments. Parents report that they feel included and their differences are valued.
- The quality of services available to all families who wish to use them across the five centres is good. Staff model effectively how to play, talk and listen to babies and young children at a range of centre groups. Sessions are planned and resourced well with good use of external expertise such as from the Parents Early Education Partnership (PEEP).

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

Requires improvement

- Not enough parents are formally helping the centre group to improve through the family forums and the advisory board. As a consequence, only a minority of families from target groups are registered

with the centres and using services.

- The local authority has not provided enough challenge through the annual discussion about priorities to ensure that all centre targets are specific and measurable.
- Safeguarding policies and procedures meet requirements. Staff are trained effectively, they are given good supervision about their caseload, and case files are adequate. Cases are monitored and checked by leaders on a regular basis to ensure that the correct steps are taken to protect children and vulnerable parents. Where children are in care or identified as in need, staff work well with individual families and keep contact with other agencies involved. Staff assess the needs of children and families well. While the centre is supporting almost all local children subject to a child protection plan effectively, this is due to the diligence and determination of centre leaders more than the local authority which does not do enough to ensure that high-quality information and data are made available to the centre group in a timely manner.
- Leaders and staff have an adequate understanding of the local area, a clear view of priorities and understand the barriers to improvement. Centre leaders coordinate the activities of the five centres well, and policies and procedures are applied consistently across the centre group.
- Resources are good and leaders work skilfully in ensuring that good value is gained from using premises shared with other community groups. Effective use is made of staff skills and careful consideration given to training and development. Leaders and staff have invested much time and energy in building links with other services so that other workers and local families are increasingly aware of the children's centres which has led to the increased levels of registration and engagement. The needs of target groups adequately inform the planning and evaluation of services.
- The centre's performance is adequately monitored by the advisory board, which knows the local area and can point to examples of how it has debated issues and helped the centre to improve. Members know what is happening in the centres and how staff are being managed. They review centre data at each meeting and are ambitious to see further improvement.

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	Practice consistently reflects the highest aspirations for children and their families and as a result inequalities are reducing rapidly and gaps are closing.
Grade 2	Good	Practice enables most children and their families to access good quality services that improve children's wellbeing and achieve the stated outcomes for families.
Grade 3	Requires improvement	Performance is not as good as it might reasonably be expected to be in one or more key areas.
Grade 4	Inadequate	The needs of children and families in its area are not being met and/or the leaders and managers are not providing sufficient challenge to bring about improvement to the quality of services.

Children's Centre/Children's Centre Group details

Unique reference number	80282
Local authority	Northamptonshire
Inspection number	423628
Managed by	Action for Children on behalf of Northamptonshire local authority

Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	3,543
Centre leader	Jane Pitchfork
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Telephone number	01327 350272
Email address	Jane.Pitchfork@actionforchildren.org.uk

This group consists of the following children's centres:

- URN 20493 Bugbrooke Children's Centre
- URN 20929 Deanshanger Children's Centre
- URN 21999 Middleton Cheney Children's Centre
- URN 22529 Roade Children's Centre
- URN 23340 Towcester Children's Centre

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