

Hereford City North Children's Centre Group

Widemarsh Common, Hereford, HR4 9NA

Inspection date

26–28 November 2013

| Overall effectiveness | This inspection: | Requires improvement | 3 |
|------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------|----------|
| | Previous inspection: | | |
| Access to services by young children and families | | Requires improvement | 3 |
| The quality of practice and services | | Good | 2 |
| The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management | | Inadequate | 4 |

Summary of key findings for children and families

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

- The local authority does not provide centre leaders with consistent strategic direction. Priorities for improvement are not sufficiently challenging or effectively monitored.
- Governance arrangements are ineffective. Advisory board members cannot access the management information needed to challenge or hold the centres to account. Not all advisory board members are clear about their roles and responsibilities.
- Too much data is not specific to the group's reach area. This does not allow managers to routinely analyse data to identify families who are not engaging with the centres' services or to plan more targeted provision.
- Centre staff do not place sufficient emphasis on evaluating the impact the services are having on improving the lives and well-being of families.

This children's centre group has the following strengths:

- The committed, passionate staff continue providing a good service despite strategic leadership weaknesses.
- Families who are referred to the centre and identified as in most need of help receive good support.
- Children make good progress in their learning and development which prepares them well for moving on to school.
- Strong, effective partnership working with other agencies ensures timely and effective help and support for children and their families.
- The good range of universal and targeted services successfully attracts families and contributes well to their personal development.

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 Widemarsh and Broadlands Children's Centres. The inspection was carried out at the same time as the Coningsby Children's Centre located in Leominster.

This inspection was carried out by two of Her Majesty's Inspectors and two Additional Inspectors.

The inspectors held meetings with the local authority lead officer for children's centres, the improvement adviser for Herefordshire, the local services coordinator, the service manager, health and education professionals, partner agencies, outreach workers, early years practitioners, volunteers and representatives from the advisory board. They also spoke with parents, and looked at outcomes of satisfaction surveys. They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation including the centre's self-evaluation, development plan, data, the local authority quality assurance records, a sample of case studies, safeguarding procedures and children's development records.

The inspectors visited activities taking place at Coningsby, Widemarsh and Broadlands centres and community venues.

Inspection team

| | |
|-------------|-----------------------------------------|
| Cliff Rose | Her Majesty's Inspector, Lead Inspector |
| Joy Law | Her Majesty's Inspector |
| Graham Sims | Additional Inspector |
| Aileen King | Additional Inspector |

Full report

Information about the centre group

The Hereford City North Children's Centre Group consists of two children's centres located in the northern part of Hereford City. The group also works collaboratively with other children's centres throughout the county. The local service coordinator (LSC) is based at the Widemarsh centre. She coordinates services at both centres on behalf of the service manager (families) responsible for all nine children's centres in the county. The LSC is supported by a shared pool of centre workers, who work across centres as required. Since a number of budget cuts and reorganisation in the summer of 2013 the family support workers previously based and line managed at children's centre level now form part of one of four Early Help Teams (EHT) in the county. The EHT covering the same area as the group is managed by the Service manager (young people). Both service managers are line managed by the county's Head of Early Help. All of the core services are managed and led by Herefordshire County Council. The newly formed children's centre group shares an advisory board with two other centres in the South of Hereford city. The advisory board is made up of a cross-section of professionals, parents and carers and is responsible for overseeing the day-to-day running of the group and its strategic development.

The group fulfils its core purpose by offering a range of services for families, working with other partner organisations and by referring parents and children to other specialist providers. The group does not provide full-time early years provision but offers advice and guidance to parents on the daycare and childminding facilities available within the local communities.

Widemarsh Children's Centre is a phase two centre and opened in 2009. It is located in the North East of the cathedral city of Hereford. The centre's reach consists of five wards, which includes an area of relatively high deprivation for the county and areas lying outside the city from which access by public transport to the centre is more difficult. Broadlands Children's Centre is a phase three centre, which opened in September 2010. It is located in the North West of the city. Its reach area covers parts of the North city and several outlying villages from which access by public transport is an issue for some families. The centre is based in the ward containing the most vulnerable children in the area.

The group serves communities in which there are pockets of high levels of deprivation and disadvantage. Hereford city is the county town for the sparsely populated county. In addition to retail it contains a number of factories and processing centres. The largest two employers, a cider maker and a chicken processing plant are both close to the Widemarsh Centre.

The group supports 36 registered childminders and 18 childcare settings. The combined reach area contains 18 primary schools and four high schools. Children start early years provision with skills that are typical for their age.

There are 2,785 children under five years of age in the combined area served by the group. The total number of lone parents in Herefordshire with at least one child not in any form, of employment totals 1,415. Most families are of White British heritage. The percentage of residents from Black or minority ethnic backgrounds is much lower than elsewhere in the West Midlands. Most ethnic minority families are from Eastern Europe.

What does the group need to do to improve further?

- Work with the local authority and key partners to improve the quality and range of data available to the centres that is specific to the reach area, and make effective use of this data in order to:
 - identify the target groups in each area and
 - plan carefully targeted provision accordingly
 - enable the local authority to provide robust strategic direction to partnership working and the sharing of information
 - enable the local authority to provide effective challenge to the centre by sharpening targets, timelines and measures of impact and monitor the centres' work more rigorously.
- Improve the way the group evaluates its effectiveness by:
 - making sure that the information it holds about families and the records it keeps of families who use the centres are accurate
 - analysing the information carefully to identify any particular groups whose needs are not being met by the centres
 - ensuring that the centres' self-evaluation focuses more on the impact the group is having on families, rather than on the activities it provides.
- Strengthen the effectiveness of the advisory board by:
 - ensuring all members are clear about their roles and responsibilities
 - ensuring members have access to enough management information to equip them to look critically at how each centre is performing, challenge decision-making and hold the group to account to meet challenging development targets
 - increasing parents' awareness and involvement in the centres' work.
- Increase the robustness of tracking and monitoring of services to show the full impact of the centres' work and use this information to shape future services by:
 - embedding the new systems for checking on children's progress
 - checking on the progress made by those referred to other services or who attend adult learning courses to assess the impact and effectiveness of these services and gauge what other help these people might require
 - finding out why some groups, such as those living in workless households or in the areas of greatest disadvantage, use the centres less frequently than others, and seek more innovative ways to encourage them to engage in the centres' activities.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Requires improvement

- The children's centres have established good relationships with a range of partners who are working collaboratively to identify families, including those expecting children, and young children who would benefit from their services. This approach is successful in identifying those who are in greatest need, but the approach is not robust enough to identify those with lower levels of need.
- The centres establish initial contact with parents of new-born babies and are registering an increasing number of children. The centres maintain good contact with those who have been referred by other partners and with families who choose to attend the centres' activities and use this contact to provide good support, advice and guidance.
- The group does not have robust strategies to analyse data to identify families who are not engaging with the centres' services or to maintain contact with these families. Information provided by the centres about their services is not always successful in reaching its intended audience.
- Through partnership with other organisations, the centres are identifying those families most in

need of intervention and support and providing good-quality universal and specialist services to meet their needs. However, the centres have not routinely analysed attendance data to ascertain what proportion of families from target groups are attending the centres' activities. The centres do not have robust mechanisms for identifying lower levels of need in families who do not attend activities at the centres.

- The centres organise some universal services in satellite venues to engage new parents and publicise what the centres have on offer for families. However, the centres no longer have sufficient personnel to engage in extensive outreach work to encourage more families to access the centres' services.
- The group facilitates arrangements for targeted children to take up free entitlement to early education. The take-up rate for the centres' reach area is high.
- The centres monitor families' attendance at their various services and activities and receive feedback to enable them to evaluate what impact the services have had on families. However, the number of families using the centres' services is low given the number of families living within the reach areas. The centres do not have sufficiently effective strategies for encouraging more families to attend universal services.

The quality of practice and services

Good

- Well qualified staff undertake in-depth assessments of the most vulnerable families and provide focused work which has a positive impact on families. Centre workers, use effective strategies to enable those parents who engage with centre to focus on the needs of the child and measure any improvement in their parenting, the home environment and economic well-being. Portage workers ensure that learning and development sessions are matched accurately to each child's needs and provide focused work which results in smooth transitions for children moving on to school.
- Staff are committed to improving children's and families' lives and focus on working with children up to two years of age. The centres provide a varied range of universal and targeted services including a range of parenting programmes. Parents develop a good understanding of their own and their child's feelings, and develop skills and confidence in managing their children's behaviour.
- Early Years Foundation Stage Profile data show that children make good progress from their starting points. The gap between the most disadvantaged children and others is narrowing overall and reducing inequalities. Centre workers offer support to outreach groups giving priority to those in areas where schools have the lowest profile scores. Staff provide play experiences to children and their parents. Sessions are well planned and recorded. The records are very informative and help staff and parents to promote children's learning and development. Consequently, children have increased self-esteem through engaging with the outdoors and developing their confidence, independence and social skills.
- The centres has developed close relationships with a number of local early years providers to ensure children with special educational needs and those supported by government funding are helped to make a smooth transition into school. Children with communication and language delay and special educational needs are supported well by the group. The group provides support to voluntary-run outreach groups and childminders. Partnerships with schools are effective. The partnership with Broadlands School is being re-established following a management restructure
- Families experiencing domestic violence are well supported. Parents who have been victims of abuse are helped to regain their confidence and understand the impact of all forms of abuse on

the development of their children. Parents talked positively about how they value the opportunities to come together during sessions, and how they feel safe and know they are not alone.

- Access to accredited adult learning programmes to improve the skills, knowledge and employability of adults who are out of work, are based on need or request. Training in English, mathematics, information technology and first aid is commissioned through adult education and delivered in community centres or one of the children's centres. Parents have good access to a good range of parenting sessions.
- The centres provide good care, guidance and support through effective one-to-one support to families in their homes, health visitors and attendance at sessions. Parent spoke positively about how they feel supported, not judged, and feel listened to and valued.
- The centre makes good use of volunteers within the centre. Parent-led groups and breastfeeding peer support workers are encouraged and supported well. The centre values the work of the volunteers and recognise the impact they have on sustainability of services. As a result, the group is currently in the process of recruiting more volunteers and has introduced more robust systems to ensure suitability.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

Inadequate

- The local authority has not provided effective strategic direction. Over the last two years a combination of budget cuts and reorganisation within the council led to a succession of officers each having responsibility for the county's children's centres' annual conversations for a short time before they either moved or were made redundant. This resulted in a lack of continuity and hampered the local authority's understanding of the work of the children's centres. This was evident in the latest record of annual conversation for the group, produced at the urgent request of the service manager immediately prior to the inspection. It greatly overplayed the group's strengths and achievements and failed to recognise the areas for development.
- Governance is weak. In addition to the lack of strategic direction from council officers, the advisory board has not been provided with enough information or guidance on the particular issues facing families in the centres' reach areas to help the group and its centres to prioritise the target groups in most need of support in their immediate areas. The group shares an advisory board with two other centres in the South of the city and while there is some commonality and value in a city wide approach not all board members were fully aware of their roles or responsibilities. Attendance at board meetings is erratic. Partners often send different representatives to successive meetings or are not represented. Those who attend exchange valuable information; however they do not provide challenge to the centres over their performance.
- The service manager and local service coordinator recognise the need for clearer terms of reference for the advisory board and training for its members. A review is already underway.
- The service manager and local service coordinator monitor staff performance and the quality of programmes and sessions in the centres well. They and centre staff have worked hard to maintain the quality of services against a background of funding and staffing cuts. They have not been able to monitor the effectiveness of meeting the support needs of families from target groups in the area so well due to shortcomings in the available data. However during the inspection they demonstrated that new computer software now enables them to do so.

- Centre leaders demonstrated a good understanding of the strengths and areas for improvement for the group. However, this was not fully expressed in the latest self-evaluation, which was too descriptive and over optimistic in its grading of the access and leadership and management aspects of the provision.
- Staff including those from the pool of centre staff and other resources are deployed effectively within the group to best meet the needs of young children and families. The group already has some parent-led groups and intends wherever possible to introduce more to free up employed staff to be used to better effect.
- Children most at risk are safeguarded because of close working between centre staff and health and social work colleagues. The family support workers formerly employed in the centres and now part of an early help team provide support for children whose need for support falls short of a child protection plan. They are still in regular contact with the centres. Staff have received appropriate training in case recording, including the use of the Common Assessment Framework process. Families experiencing domestic violence and abuse are well supported.

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. |

Select details

| | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Unique reference number | 80733 |
| Local authority | Herefordshire |
| Inspection number | 433947 |
| Managed by | The local authority |
| Approximate number of children under five in the reach area | 2785 |
| Centre leader | Michele Allam |
| Date of previous inspection | Not previously inspected |
| Telephone number | 01432-383430 |
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This group consists of the following children's centres:

- Widemarsh Children's Centre
- Broadlands Children's Centre

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