

Elm Tree Children's Centre

Elm Tree Avenue, Stockton-on-Tees, Cleveland, TS19 0UW

Inspection date 18–19 March 2014

Overall effectiveness	This inspection: Previous inspection:	Requires improvement	3
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 is a centre that requires improvement. It is not good because:

- The number of families who participate regularly in centre activities does not represent a majority from the local area. The local authority is not providing the centre with the full range of available information to identify and establish contact with the majority of families most in need of support. Outreach work is not sufficiently focused on identifying families with the greatest needs.
- Not enough parents, especially from workless households, enhance their education, engage in training, volunteering or extend their workplace skills. Links with Jobcentre Plus are not as strong as with other partners.
- The proportion of mothers who choose to breastfeed their babies is low. The centre and its partners are not doing enough to promote breastfeeding.
- There are not enough opportunities for parents to contribute to the centre's decision-making about how it will develop in the future.

This centre has the following strengths:

- The small staff team work with commitment and drive. Their inclusive approach makes everyone feel valued and welcomed. Parents say that staff are 'very supportive' and 'give good advice and encouragement' and 'are always there when you need them'.
- Monitoring and tracking of the progress made by families is well established and accurately reflects the good levels of progress made by those who attend the centre.
- Partnerships with early years providers, including most schools, are effective, resulting in children being well prepared for school.
- The centre leader, staff, key partners and advisory board members recognise that the centre requires improvement and are making progress towards achieving this. They are passionately committed to doing whatever it takes to continually improve outcomes for families.

Information about this inspection

- The inspection of this children's centre was carried out under Part 3A of the Childcare Act 2006 as amended by the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009.
- This inspection was carried out by three additional inspectors.
- The inspectors held meetings with the centre leader and staff, local authority representatives, as well as members of the advisory board. They held meetings or spoke on the telephone with many representatives of partner organisations including health, early years and adult education. The inspectors also held meetings with some parents and spoke informally with many more.
- The inspectors visited all the rooms in the children's centre, and also the neighbouring Elm Tree Community Centre which is used for courses and activities for parents. They observed a variety of activities for young children, including a baby clinic and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Inspection team

Dan Grant, Lead inspector

Additional inspector

Susan Pepper

Additional Inspector

Michael Glickman

Additional inspector

Full report

Information about the centre

- The centre became operational in 2008 as a phase three stand-alone centre and offers a range of services which include child health, family play sessions, parenting programmes, adult education, and family outreach. It is situated within the Elm Tree Community Centre in Eaglescliffe. The centre is open Monday to Friday 8.30am to 4.30pm. The centre is managed by 4Children on behalf of the local authority. The centre leader has day-to-day management responsibility for three other children's centres. An advisory board, comprising key partners, provides its governance. The staff team includes a family outreach worker and a centre support worker.
- There are 1140 children under five years of age living in the centre's area, which covers the north-west of the town and is within the 70% most deprived areas in the country. Most children enter early education with knowledge and skills that are typical for their age. Data show that overall 11% of children live in workless households. Some 10% of families are eligible for the childcare element of Working Tax Credit. Approximately 2% of families living within the reach area are of minority ethnic heritage.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

- Increase the number of families using the centre, especially those most in need, by the local authority establishing more effective protocols for sharing key data and information, more effective marketing of what is on offer, and through more effective outreach work.
- Extend the opportunities for more adults, particularly those from workless homes, to enhance their economic well-being by:
 - building stronger links with training providers and Jobcentre Plus advisers
 - carrying out regular checks on individual education and training needs
 - actively promoting volunteering so that more parents sign up
 - establishing a system to track how well adults make progress when they
 - access courses or programmes, and use the data gathered to help plan future services.
- Increase the number of mothers choosing to breastfeed their babies by working more effectively with key partners, such as the local authority, health and voluntary agencies, for example, by developing more thorough strategies to better promote the advantages of breastfeeding and providing more effective support.
- Strengthen the role that parents play in the planning and development of services and in making decisions about the most important priorities for improvement, for example, through the formation of a parents' forum and encouraging more parents to become members of the advisory board.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Requires improvement

- The centre staff are becoming increasingly effective at identifying all of the families in the area and, although the number who regularly use the centre's services is rising, it does not represent a majority. The number of families using the centres services who are identified as in most need of support is not rising quickly enough.
- Increasingly effective partnership working with midwives has resulted in the centre receiving accurate information about all new and expected births. However, the local authority does not have effective operational arrangements to provide the centre with enough detailed information to help it identify families in most need of support, such as lone parents and those on a low income.
- Staff have an adequate understanding of the needs of the local community and use this increasing effectively in their work with key partners, such as health visitors, to provide help for families in need of support. The proportion of families using funding for good quality child care for two-year-olds is high and support for families known to have a disabled child is good.
- A few families who are unable to attend the centre receive effective support from staff visiting them at home to help improve their parenting skills. Staff work together with families to make sure they remain engaged until their needs are met. However, outreach work is not sufficiently effective in identifying more families in most need of support.
- Staff provide an adequate range of universal and targeted activities to help target young children's communication and language skills as many families experience long delays for speech and language therapy.

The quality of practice and services

Requires improvement

- Universal sessions, such as 'Tiny Treasures' and 'Stay and Play', are very popular with families and help those who attend the centre to see what else is on offer and how it might help them. Information about other services is well presented and staff provide good advice and guidance to those in need of further support or help. Centre staff are enthusiastic and are seen by many families as positive role-models because of their knowledge and experience, for example, giving effective advice on diet and nutrition during the baby clinic.
- The centre has established good partnerships with the majority of early years providers in the area and has made good progress in preparing children well for school. For example, staff from several schools told inspectors how the centre staff have worked with parents to get their children toilet-trained in preparation for school. Staff work successfully with the early years advisor, so that almost all of the schools and private, voluntary and independent childcare providers are at least good or better.
- Working together with health visitors and the family nurse, partnership is continually improving and becoming increasingly effective in increasing immunisation rates and reducing obesity levels in children. However, the proportion of mothers who choose to breastfeed their babies remains significantly low. The centre and its partners do not have a sufficiently clear strategy to promote breastfeeding and have not prioritised this as an area for improvement.
- The centre and its key partners have recognised the area has a high number of preventable accidents in the home, particularly involving children. Staff work effectively with Cleveland Fire and Rescue Service and the local authority home safety project, to raise awareness and help families prevent accidents. For example, parents learn emergency first aid training, including resuscitation.
- Not enough parents, especially those from workless households, enhance their education, engage in training, volunteering or extend their workplace skills. Links with Jobcentre Plus are not well established and attempts to offer advice and support sessions related to finding work have been very poorly attended. Furthermore, systems to track how well adults make progress when they access courses and to help plan future adult learning programmes are not yet fully established.
- The centre has detailed records on all of the families receiving services. These records show that staff make thorough assessments of the needs of each family and plan how best to support them.

Families who attend activities make good progress in their well-being and learning how to keep their children safe. The centre leader maintains good oversight of the work.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

Requires improvement

- The centre leader and the advisory board have an appropriate vision of how the centre will continue to improve and are ambitious for the success of all families in the area. There is a clear record of improvement in many areas of the centre's performance. This has led to a rising number of families using the centre and improved partnerships with other organisations to deliver better and more effective services. The centre is quickly establishing an increasingly positive reputation in the local community, and with partner organisations, for the way it improves outcomes and tackles inequalities for families using its services. However, the rate of progress is too slow and more work is required to further increase engagement.
- The local authority has adequate arrangements to ensure that the centre identifies the key areas of its work which need improvement. Recent progress has been made towards establishing protocols to allow the centre to receive accurate information about the families most in need of support. However, it is too soon to see the benefit of this because important, detailed information is still not available to the centre. Consequently, the centre's work to support these families is not fully effective.
- The centre has adequate safeguarding arrangements and effective policies and procedures which ensure that families using its services are safe and well protected. Staff use the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) effectively and have a good level of experience and knowledge of safeguarding. The centre works effectively with key partners to promote the welfare of children in need, looked-after children and those subject to child protection plans.
- The centre leader receives good support from senior managers and ensures that the staff receive appropriate training and supervision. Toys, equipment and other resources at the centre are of a satisfactory standard and are valued by families who use them.
- Staff seek the views of parents and children regularly and frequently at the end of sessions. However, the centre does not have an established parents' forum and there are currently no parent members on the advisory board. Consequently, there are insufficient opportunities for parents to fully participate in discussions with staff, leaders and each other to influence the work of the centre.
- The centre staff work effectively to reduce inequalities for families who use the centre, such as those with disabled children. However, the centre is not reducing inequalities enough for other groups, such as lone parents and those from workless households, because too few of them are involved in the centre's activities.

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 details

Unique reference number	21091
Local authority	Stockton-on-Tees
Inspection number	427459
Managed by	4Children
Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	1140
Centre leader	Sarah Thompson
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Telephone number	01642 603225
Email address	Sarah.Thompson@4Children.org

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