

Northern Community Children's Centre

Elm Tree Community Centre, Elm Tree Avenue, Stockton on Tees, TS19 0UW

Inspection dates	25–26 June 2014
Previous inspection date	Not previously inspected

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:

- Overall a majority, rather than a large majority of families regularly access the centres services. Only a small minority of those families identified by the centre as in most need of their support, with the exception of teenage parents, receive the centre's support.
- The proportion of mothers who continue to breastfeed at six- to- eight weeks following the birth of their child continues to remain well below the national average.
- Partnership working with providers of adult learning and skills are under-developed, as is the range of information, advice and training.
- Parents and prospective parents do not take an active role in decision making as representatives on the advisory board. Too few parents are members of the parents' forum.

This centre has the following strengths:

- Close partnership work, particularly with health colleagues, is starting to help increase the number of families with whom the centre is working.
- Safeguarding is given high priority. Families benefit from well coordinated support from a wide range of agencies.
- Most eligible two-, three- and four-year-olds access funded early education with good or better providers.
- The experienced leaders, managers and the local authority recognise the centre requires improvement. They have a clear understanding of what is working well and what they need to do to improve the lives for families and are addressing weaknesses accordingly.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

- Improve access to services by young children and families by:
 - increasing further the proportion of families who regularly access the centre's provision and activities, particularly those the centre has identified as in most need of their support. For example, lone parents and those from workless households.
- Improve the quality of practice and services by:
 - continuing to work with health partners to increase the number of mothers who breastfeed their babies for sustained periods of time
 - increasing the promotion of, and participation rates on adult learning courses and actively promoting volunteering opportunities
 - working closely with adult education partners to provide clear progression routes onto accredited learning programmes.
- Improve the leadership, governance and management of the centre by:
 - strengthening the role that parents play in the planning and development of services
 - increasing the number of parents from the centre's community who are willing to become members of the parents' forum and the advisory board.

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 children's centre cluster manager, staff and key partners. They met representatives from 4Children, the local authority and members of the advisory board. The inspectors reviewed satisfaction surveys and they took into account parents' views. They conducted an observation of an activity jointly with the children's centre cluster manager.

The inspectors visited activities which took place at some of the outreach venues the centre uses and they reviewed evaluations of them.

They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation, such as the centre's self-evaluation, development plan, data and a selection of case files.

Inspection team

Sue Pepper, Lead inspector	Additional inspector
Judith Elderfield	Additional inspector
Eileen Grimes	Additional inspector

Full report

Information about the centre

Northern Community Children's Centre became operational in 2012. This is a 'virtual' centre which covers a wide rural geographical area that includes Stillington, Wynard, Billingham and Norton. Staff are based in the Wolviston Village Community Centre where they deliver a few activities. Family support, health and some adult learning is offered from four other children's centres; Elm Tree, Freddie Nattrass, New Life and Footsteps and a range of community outreach venues.

The vast majority of families are of White British heritage. There are approximately 1405 children under five years of age living in the community. Children generally enter early years provision with skills typical for their age.

The majority of families live in affluent areas but there are pockets of deprivation where some families live in an area ranked 38% most deprived nationally. Data show that 14% of children live in workless households and 11% of those families are dependent on the childcare element of Working Tax Credit. The centre had identified teenage parents, lone parents and children living in workless households in most need of their support. The main issue that some families face is social isolation.

The centre is managed by 4Children on behalf of the local authority. The centre shares an advisory board with New Life Children's Centre.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Requires improvement

- Leaders, staff and partners are starting to collate better information on the issues affecting families living in the area. As a result, the centre is becoming more effective in identifying those most in need through programmes such as 'Family Pathways' and promoting their engagement.
- The centre has worked closely with their health partners to help increase the engagement of prospective and new parents over the last year. This has resulted in a large majority of families being registered with the centre. Although overall a majority of families, including teenage parents, engage with services, only a small minority of lone parents and families from workless households regularly access services.
- This is a 'virtual' children centre which has an office base only. To engage with families in the reach, including those most in need, the centre produces parent friendly advertisements of the services on offer. Effective collaborative working is in place to offer services and activities for families which are delivered at other children centres and local community venues. However, the number of families attending most services is variable and often low.
- Services are constantly reviewed to ensure they meet the needs of vulnerable families identified by the centre. The 'Stay and Play' group jointly run at Frederick Nattrass Children's Centre is popular. 'First friends' and 'Rhythm Babies' help to prevent parents feelings of isolation and promote children's learning but these sessions are not well attended. The number of parents starting to access the 'Healthy Start Clinic' at the New Life Children Centre is growing. As a consequence, more families are starting to receive good advice on healthy lifestyles and well-being.
- A suitable range of universal and targeted activities are provided which help to promote young children's development, particularly their social, communication and language skills. The centre works effectively with partners to ensure the take-up of good quality funded early education places for children aged two, three and four years old is high.
- Access to adult education and the monitoring and tracking of adult learning is underdeveloped. There are insufficient opportunities for parents to achieve accredited qualifications. The centre has encouraged some parents to attend family learning courses but overall the take-up of courses is low.

The quality of practice and services**Requires improvement**

- The new 'Now I am 2' programme promotes emotional development which helps to prepare children in vulnerable circumstances for their transition into nursery. However, it is too early to tell how successful this is at improving children's transition, as too few children attend.
- Evidence based parenting programmes such as '123 Magic' are included in the centre's activity programme. Specific support aimed at helping parents to manage children's challenging behaviour is having a positive impact. For example, by reflecting on their own parenting and family routines parents are learning to manage their own children's behaviour more effectively.
- Children benefit from high quality crèche sessions where 'Magic Moment' books are used well to track individual children's progress and plan for the next stage in their development. Training is provided for staff to help them consistently enhance children's communication skills by the speech and language service. Consequently, children at risk of speech and language delay are well supported.
- Case files are maintained to a good standard. Staff make thorough assessments of the needs of families using the centre's services to plan how best to support them.
- Families that attend the centre's services are well supported. Parents are helped to learn how to keep their children safe and healthy. They are also helped to understand the importance of providing children with valuable learning experiences.
- Most of the health-specific targets are met. The take-up of immunisation is high and levels of childhood obesity are low. Despite a general proactive approach to encouraging breastfeeding the proportion of mothers who choose to breastfeed remains low.
- Partnerships with adult training providers are not yet embedded. As a result, there are insufficient accredited programmes known to the centre which adult learners could be signposted to. The take-up of volunteering opportunities is very low and therefore opportunities for adult learners to build their confidence and skills to be more prepared for work are limited.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management**Requires improvement**

- The leaders of the centre are reflective practitioners and self-evaluation is accurate. Data about the reach area are improving and starting to be used to plan and monitor improvements. Development plans are effective and are starting to show some success.
- The local authority, 4Children and the children's centre cluster manager recognise where more work is required. For example, they know that services aimed at adults are limited and they need to engage more of the families they have identified as in most need of their support. A vacancy in the small staff team has temporarily hampered progress; however the limited finance available to the centre is managed well by the sharing of buildings and staff.
- Staff are well-qualified and passionate about reducing inequalities for families. For example, a crèche is available for families to prevent barriers to access. However, the centre is not reducing inequalities in life chances fast enough for families in vulnerable circumstances because too few are attending the centre and it is unclear whether teenage parents are signposted to further education.
- Good safeguarding arrangements with key partners are underpinned by robust policies and procedures which ensure families using the services are safe. The needs of children subject to child protection plans are particularly well met. The Common Assessment Framework process is used very well to coordinate effective early support and prevent the escalation of some situations.
- Several partners referred to the centre as 'work in progress'. There are good partnerships in place with the local authority, those commissioned to run children's centres and outside agencies. Improved information sharing, particularly with health professionals, is key to their continual development. Links with other partners, such as schools are developing.
- Governance arrangements are clear and performance management ensures staff are well supported and that training links to the centre's priorities. The joint advisory board is well established with a range of partners attending, however none of them are parents from the centre's reach area. In addition, few parents attend the parents' forum so they have insufficient opportunities to be involved in decision making at a more formal level.
- Staff frequently seek the views of parents at the end of sessions and use them to shape future services, such as holiday events. In addition, the 'You said, we did' board keeps users informed of any changes following consultation with them.

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	23742
Local authority	Stockton on Tees
Inspection number	442884
Managed by	4Children on behalf of the local authority

Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	1405
Centre leader	Sarah Thompson
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Telephone number	01642 603225
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