

Chelmsford North children's centre group

Chetwood Children's Centre, Shirebourn Vale, South Woodham Ferrers, Chelmsford, Essex. CM3 5ZW

Inspection dates	29–31 July 2014
Previous inspection date	Not previously inspected

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

Summary of key findings for children and families

This children's centre group is good.

- Most families living in the area are registered at the centre, with many regularly accessing services.
- Staff have worked tirelessly to keep services open for families during times of significant change. This has meant that despite the reduced opening hours of some centres, the number of families accessing services has continued to rise.
- Staff develop very positive relationships with families. As a result, parents trust staff and appreciate the extensive help and guidance they receive.
- The individual support families receive, especially those in most need, is very effective.
- Staff work very well with other agencies to provide a good range of services which help families, especially at times of crisis.
- Leaders and managers work very well together to challenge each other and make sure families receive high quality services.
- Staff monitor the quality of services and make sure these have a positive impact on individual families.

It is not outstanding because:

- Systems for monitoring the impact of the centres' work on families from priority groups are too new. As a result, it is too early to clearly evidence the rates of improvement over time.
- Parents are not yet fully involved in the planning of children's centre services.

What does the group need to do to improve further?

- Improve the procedures for checking information to:
 - ensure there are clearer systems in place to demonstrate the impact of the centres' work on priority families
 - ensure there are consistently robust procedures in place to track all children's progress; especially two-year old children who are eligible for funded early education and children's progression within the Early Years Foundation Stage
 - ensure relevant services are provided to address the learning and development needs of both boys and girls
 - ensure staff deliver activities that are well planned, and how their progress will be measured
 - provide clearer evidence of the numbers of parents, especially those from low income families, workless households and lone parents, who have been supported back into training and employment.
- Further develop the new arrangements for governance by ensuring there are a greater number of parents involved in the development of children's centre services.

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 Beeches Close children's centre, Bumblebee children's centre, Chetwood and Stock children's centre, Galleywood children's centre and Larkrise children's centre.

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

The inspectors held meetings with the children's centre cluster manager, the senior family practitioner and the 4Children East of England manager; senior leaders and managers from the local authority and 4Children; family practitioners; senior managers from children's services and health services; representatives from commissioned services; health visitors and a midwife, local headteachers and managers of pre-school settings; parents and centre users, and a local councillor.

The inspectors visited range of services and activities taking place at each of the centres, including a baby clinic, the 'Talk to Me' programme and the 'Hop, Skip and Jump' session.

Inspectors observed the centres' work, spoke informally with parents and looked at a range of relevant documentation. This included the group's delivery plan, the group's self-evaluation assessment and information reports on the centres' performance.

Inspection team

Jo Caswell, Lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Susan Mann

Her Majesty's Inspector

Judith Elderfield

Additional Inspector

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Full report

Information about the group

The Chelmsford North children's centre group consists of five centres serving a wide geographical area, incorporating the towns and villages surrounding Chelmsford. All centres are managed by one cluster manager. Following a review of children's centres in Essex, in April 2014 the Stock children's centre merged with the Chetwood centre. The Beeches Close, Galleywood and Bumblebee centres have significantly reduced their opening hours. The centres are governed by 4Children on behalf of the local authority. The group offers a range of activities and services including family support, adult learning, community work, stay and play groups, child health clinics and parenting programmes.

The group serves a community of 5,397 children aged under five years. None of the centres in the group serve areas ranked as being some of the poorest in the country, although there are some pockets of significant deprivation. Approximately 13% of young children live in households where no one is working. The population is mainly White British, although there is an increasing number of families from a range of minority ethnic groups. The centre group has identified the families who are in most need of support to include: children living in workless households, parents with mental health issues, families from minority ethnic groups including those who speak English as an additional language, and lone parents.

The children's centres are not formally linked to any early years settings or schools.

Children's skills, knowledge and abilities on entry to early education are generally below those typical for their age.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Good

- In total, over 90% of families are registered at the children's centres and over 70% regularly engage in relevant services and activities. This includes all families who are deemed to be most in need. For example, 73% of the children living in workless households regularly access services.
- The centres have successfully engaged the vast majority of parents known to have emotional health issues, such as post-natal depression and victims of domestic violence. Parents have completed relevant support programmes which have had a very positive impact on their well-being and ability to make life-changing decisions.
- Concerted action has been taken to reach a greater number of families from different minority ethnic groups. In the last year, 85% of these families are now registered at the centre and regularly engage in services and activities.
- The cluster manager has worked effectively to strengthen the links with social care colleagues. This means information about families known to be at risk is now regularly shared. Consequently, 100% of all children known to be subject to child protection plans regularly access and engage with centre services.
- A large amount of the centres' work is carried out on an individual basis with families in their own homes. Family practitioners have an excellent knowledge of the issues facing families living in the community. They work exceptionally well to ensure parents have access to services they really need.
- Health colleagues and centre staff work together effectively to deliver services directly from the centres. This means prospective parents become familiar with the children's centre staff and start using the centres through the ante-natal stage of their pregnancy. New parent groups, breastfeeding support and activities specifically for babies ensure parents regularly attend centre services soon after giving birth.
- Good strategies are in place to ensure that staff maintain contact with families, when they have not

used the centre for a while. Highly effective strategies are in place to identify whether any additional support is needed, and to ensure families continue to remain aware of what services are available.

- Staff work creatively to overcome any issues which may prevent families from accessing services. Much work is carried out in the local community in venues which parents say they can reach easily. This means attendance levels continue to rise.
- Significant work has been carried out with the local traveller communities and this has led to an increase in the numbers of families benefitting from centre services. Staff visit traveller families regularly, sometimes jointly with the library van. This helps parents develop positive links with centre staff and encourages children to develop an interest in books and stories from a young age. This has a positive impact on children's reading skills and begins to foster a love of reading.
- The centre provides good support for the increasing number of Polish families moving into the area. The 'Polish pop-in' group is well-attended at the Beeches children's centre and provides good support for families who do not speak English as their first language.

The quality of practice and services

Requires improvement

- Systems to track the impact of the children's centre services on groups of families are currently being developed. Information is available to clearly indicate how many families attend regularly. However, the range of information has only recently been developed to cover the whole centre group. This means it is too early for leaders and managers to clearly assess the impact of centre services on specific priority families over time.
- The children's centres make a positive difference to the learning and development of those children who use services, including those from families in most need of support. Staff monitor children's learning to ensure those at risk of falling behind from their peers make good progress. However, at present, staff do not have an accurate picture of the impact of centre services. This is because plans to monitor children's progress once they start school have only just begun.
- Centre services make a positive difference to children's learning and development so those who access relevant activities make good progress. However, not all information about children's learning and development is used to good effect. For example, boys often achieve less well than girls and the centre activity programme has been slow to respond to this. As a result, programmes to help boys catch-up with girls in their learning in the Beeches Close area in particular, are not fully established.
- Services for children are supported by basic planning that gives staff a useful guide to the organisation of sessions. However, the quality of planning and evaluation of learning for children is variable. Some plans give a detailed overview which support a well-organised session with clear targets as to what children are going to learn and how progress will be measured. However, others are too brief and repetitive, providing little guidance on how to check the effectiveness of children's development.
- Some children, including those from minority ethnic backgrounds, receive focused support in helping to prepare for starting school. The 'Hop, Skip, Jump' summer holiday group gives children and parents a good start by preparing them well. However, the numbers involved in these groups are quite low, with fewer than twenty families involved.
- The 'Talk with Me' programme provides good opportunities for children who need additional support with speech and language. As a result, children improve their communication skills and this helps them to become ready for starting school. However, the planning and delivery of some of these activities are not as effective as they could be.
- Although information is available to centre leaders relating to some priority groups, this has not always been used sufficiently robustly to identify improvement trends. For example, centre staff have only just started to track the progress of two-year old children. Systems to monitor parents who undertake courses to support them returning to training and employment, especially lone and workless parents, are still in the early stages. Attendance and completion rates for some courses are low.
- The impact of children's centre services on individual children and families is clearly evident. Many

parents commended the centres' work and praised the dedication of the staff. For example, one parent told inspectors: 'The centre is my sanctuary'. Another parent said, 'The centre turned my life around'.

- The children's centres provide good care, guidance and support to all parents, particularly those who are most vulnerable. This is achieved through effective one-to-one support, parenting programmes, health and well-being support, first aid for babies and building self-confidence courses. This has resulted in the increased confidence of parents being able to support the sometimes challenging behaviour of their children. In total, 87% of all parents registered at the centres confirmed they had improved their confidence in parenting since attending services.
- Partner agencies were unanimous in their praise for the work of the children's centre and the staff team. It is evident that children's centres are highly regarded within the community and play a vital role in working effectively with other agencies to meet the needs of families.
- The children's centres play a positive part in improving family health and well-being. Breastfeeding rates are in line with national rates and the numbers of children measured as having a healthy weight at the end of the Reception year are improving. The centres run many courses to help parents develop a good understanding of healthy eating and parents benefit from understanding how to cook healthy, nutritious meals on a budget.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

Good

- The centres have only been operating as a group model since April 2014. Therefore, leadership and management arrangements are still very new. However, despite this short period, considerable work has been done in identifying families who need support and continuing to deliver services to those most in need. This has resulted in the registration and engagement levels continuing to rise, despite the changes taking place.
- Leaders and managers have a very accurate view of the strengths of practice and the priority areas for improvement. At present staff find checking information more challenging as it is still provided at an individual centre level, rather than across the whole group. Nevertheless, staff work tirelessly to monitor take-up rates and ensure the families who need services the most continue to access the support they need.
- Senior managers at both 4Children and the local authority work together well to challenge one another and set relevant targets for staff to help drive the centres' continuous improvement. Procedures for the supervision and monitoring of staff are effective so that leaders and managers are increasingly challenged and held to account.
- Procedures for self-evaluation are robust. The cluster manager and 4Children East of England regional manager have an extremely accurate view of performance and they confidently recognise where improvements are needed. Despite both only being in post for a short while, many improvements have already been made.
- Leaders and managers are fully supported by national project officers from 4Children who play a key role in shaping services and sharing best practice from a national perspective. This means management arrangements are continually reviewed and adapted in line with priority needs.
- Many priority improvement issues relating to the collation and the checking of information had already been addressed by leaders and managers. Considerable work is being undertaken to produce information in a more clear and useful format to assist managers in robustly monitoring the impact of the centres' work on identified families over time. This work is in place, but is still in its infancy.
- Governance arrangements have been fully reviewed. Clear lines of responsibility and accountability are in place. Despite centre leaders attempting to develop a parents' forum, this has not yet been successful. Although parents' views are obtained in other ways, not many parents are involved in the decision-making process and helping to shape future centre services.
- Considerable work has been completed in forging stronger links with social care colleagues. This means all services now work together effectively to support the families known to be at most risk.

Children who are looked after, subject to child protection plans, and those deemed to be 'children in need' are well supported.

- The promotion of safety and helping families in most need to keep safe, underpins all of the centres' work. Staff are highly trained and there are extensive written policies and procedures. This means every reasonable precaution is taken to protect children. Staff work collaboratively with other agencies to ensure highly effective preventative services help keep those most at risk free from harm.
- The centres make good use of resources to deliver high quality services. The individual centres are maintained to a high standard and offer a safe, welcoming environment where families know they can access help. Family practitioners are deployed well and there are good arrangements in place to work together with other services to support the needs of parents and children.

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 group details

Unique reference number	80707
Local authority	Essex
Inspection number	442710
Managed by	4Children on behalf of the local authority

Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	5,397
Cluster manager	Wendy Tayler
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Telephone number	07887 522340
Email address	Wendy.Tayler@4children.org.uk

This group consists of the following children's centres:

- Beeches Close Children's Centre (20648)
- Bumblebee Children's Centre (20652)
- Chetwood Children's Centre (20646) and Stock Children's Centre (20654)
- Galleywood Children's Centre (20653)
- Larkrise Children's Centre (20647)

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