

Central Link Children's Centre

Westfield Street, St Helens, Merseyside, WA10 1QF

Inspection dates

Previous inspection date

10–11 December 2014

02 March 2011

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

Summary of key findings for children and families

This is a centre that is inadequate.

- Not enough families in the local community, including the most vulnerable families, use centre services. Attendance of some groups of service users is too low. The local authority, centre managers and their partner agencies do not promote the centre effectively.
- The managers do not know what difference they are making to children's readiness for school. They have only recently started tracking children's learning and progress and working with local schools to check children's skills as they start school.
- There is no provision for adult learning which would enhance employability, other than signposting to courses. The impact of the lack of provision is not measured. The managers do not know how many parents need or complete parenting courses, or what difference this makes.
- Safeguarding is poor. Staff lack a clear understanding of when they should refer concerns to the appropriate agencies. Case file records are of poor quality and too little attention is given to e-safety, grooming and child sexual exploitation.
- The governance, leadership and management arrangements are inadequate. The centre lacks an independent advisory board to challenge, support and hold leaders to account, and this also limits how well partner agencies work with the centre management.
- Arrangements to check on and challenge the performance of managers and staff are weak at every level. The local authority is not helping managers to set measurable targets, and managers and staff are not held closely enough to account for how well targets are met.
- The local authority has evaluated the centre accurately, but the managers' evaluation is over-generous, and the small staff team are over-stretched across the four centres.
- Parents, including those identified as in most need, are not involved in the development of services.

It has the following strengths:

- Despite a period of intense upheaval, the newly-appointed, extremely hard-working managers have developed a team committed to improving outcomes for local families, and individuals report that centre staff are helping them to improve their lives.
- Volunteering is strong and the volunteers' progress towards employment is tracked well.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

- Improve governance, leadership and management by ensuring that the local authority:
 - secures an independent advisory board able to challenge, support and hold the managers and local authority to account and which focuses partnership working on mutual accountability for the difference they are making to improving outcomes for local families
 - helps the managers to set precise targets with measurable success criteria which cover all areas for improvement, and helps the managers to monitor and measure the impact of their work, particularly on improving outcomes for the families identified as in most need of help
 - supports the managers to evaluate their services accurately so that the right priorities are identified
 - improves staff capacity to implement the improvement actions
 - ensures that performance management arrangements hold managers and staff to account for their contribution to meeting the centre's targets.
- Strengthen safeguarding arrangements by:
 - ensuring that managers prioritise the oversight of case files in order to check that children and families are safeguarded and that concerns are referred to the correct agencies in a timely fashion
 - improving the quality of recording on family case files to ensure that they precisely evaluate need, risk assess accurately and measure the progress being made
 - improving parents' awareness of e-safety, grooming and child sexual exploitation.
- Increase the numbers of service users, including those identified as in most need of help, who are meaningfully involved in decision-making about the development of services and activities.
- Improve access by:
 - increasing the numbers of families in the community, especially those identified as in most need, who are meaningfully engaged with centre services
 - working more closely with partner agencies to share information in order to help the staff identify the needs of families in the area and to better promote centre services.
- Improve the quality and impact of services by:
 - improving the tracking of children's learning, development and progress, and working with local schools to moderate the findings
 - increasing the numbers of adults completing courses which improve their parenting skills, and by tracking the impact of this work
 - improving provision for enhancing the employability of centre users by providing relevant adult learning opportunities and by improving the systems to track the progress of adults signposted to external providers of adult learning.

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 one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and two additional inspectors, and the inspection was shadowed by another of Her Majesty's Inspectors.

The inspectors held meetings with the Assistant Director of the local authority, the Early Years Quality Improvement Manager with strategic lead for children's centres in St Helens, the centre's joint managers, representatives of partner agencies and some parents.

The inspection covered the following centres: Central Link, Moss Bank, Four Ways and Thatto Heath.

The inspectors visited all of the sites.

Inspectors observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Inspection team

Linda McLarty, Lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Parm Sansoyer

Additional inspector

Heather Hartmann

Additional inspector

Full report

Information about the centre

The Central Link Children's Centre opened in 2006 as a stand-alone centre, although since 2014 it has been operating as the 'hub' centre for the linked 'spoke' centres, namely Four Ways, Moss Bank and Thatto Heath children's centres. This reconfigured model of working is the result of the local authority review of its children's services, which started in 2012. With the local authority, the centre managers are in the process of setting up a joint advisory board. Governance is by the local authority and the centre is jointly managed by two part-time managers.

Universal and targeted services are delivered from all four centres and from venues across the community. These services include, for example, MATCH (men and their children) and volunteer-run groups such as 'Stay and Play' and 'Grandtots'. Other groups promote health and early education. Central Link liaises with various partner agencies to provide services which include health and maternity services, speech and language therapy, midwifery clinics, job seekers' support and parenting programmes, advice and support. It signposts adults to educational and training opportunities in the area.

Central Link Children's Centre is based in a renovated church hall in St. Helens, and from January 2015 it will operate an onsite day nursery, Central Link Children's Centre Nursery. Four Ways centre is adjacent to St Theresa's Primary School, and the Moss Bank centre is co-located with the day care setting Portico at Moss Bank, and Carr Mill Primary School. Thatto Heath is on the same site as Thatto Heath Community Primary School. The schools and linked day care provision were not part of this inspection and, where these have been inspected, the reports are available at www.ofsted.gov.uk.

There are 5,526 children aged from birth to four years living in the reach area of the centres. Children's skills, knowledge and abilities on entry to school-based, early years provision are below those usually seen in children of their age, especially for communication and language. The groups identified by the centre as most in need of help are: pregnant teenagers, children in the care of the authority, speakers of English as an additional language and Traveller children. The centre serves communities ranked within the top 30% of deprivation nationally. Most of the birth to four-year-old population, 96%, is from White British families, with the largest ethnic minority group being from the Polish community. Unemployment across the centre's reach area varies but averages out at 26%, and 25.8% of families are in receipt of benefits.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Inadequate

- Following the local authority review, and the very recent reconfiguration of children's centres, registration and engagement levels in all four centres dropped significantly. Partner agencies stopped referring parents as they were unsure of the centre's future, and the range of services being delivered also reduced substantially. Outreach work, including contact with pregnant mothers and some innovative outreach work in local maternity wards, has helped to increase registration so that the large majority of local families are now known to the centre staff.
- However, only a small minority of the general population regularly use centre services. The engagement of families in the groups identified as in most need of help, such as pregnant teenagers, children looked after by the local authority, children of Traveller families and those from families speaking English as an additional language, is prioritised well and tracked carefully. Despite this, only a minority of families deemed the most vulnerable regularly use centre services.
- Some activities are not well attended, for example, only one parent and one child attended a 'stay and play' session observed during the inspection. Parents using centre services enthusiastically advertise the activities to their neighbours and friends. The local authority and centre managers have identified that centre leaders and partner agencies are not yet doing enough to promote centre services systematically, for example, through better advertising and signage.
- The arrangements between partner agencies and centre managers, for sharing information which would help the staff to more accurately identify the needs of individuals and families in the area, are not effective enough.

The quality of practice and services

Inadequate

- Tracking of children does not yet enable the centre managers to show convincingly the contribution that the centre is making to children's readiness for school-based provision, or to the positive Early Years Foundation Stage Profile outcomes in St Helens. The managers are unable to demonstrate that a sufficiently high proportion of children from the groups identified as most in need have made good progress from their starting points in the prime areas of learning.
- Links with schools are not used to establish the difference that the centre is making to children's skills on entry, and the managers have not prioritised working with schools in the Four Ways and Moss Bank areas, where fewer children are reaching a good level of development.
- Managers admit that there is no provision for adult learning which would enhance job prospects. Signposting to external adult learning courses takes place, but managers do not track what difference this is making to the adults' employability and economic well-being.
- In contrast, the well-established volunteer programme has attracted many volunteers into the four centres and their progress towards paid employment is carefully tracked. The volunteers greatly enhance the centre's capacity to deliver a wider range of activities.
- However, vetting procedures to deter, detect and prevent unsuitable adults from working with families are not robust as volunteers are not checked, despite the fact that they sometimes lead groups without supervision.
- The managers are unable to show the proportion of parents identified as needing, or completing, parenting courses, or what difference this is making to their families. Although the staff do not yet measure the difference they are making to families' well-being, safety or parenting skills, individual parents report that they greatly value the help provided by centre staff. They relate that staff have strengthened their ability to cope, reduced feelings of isolation and, in some instances, improved how they manage their children's behaviour and support their learning and development.
- Although relationships appear strong with partner agencies, this has yet to translate into effective joint working. For example, there are few accurate and precise assessments of families' needs and progress and too little collation and analysis of data to show the impact of partner agencies on the centre's work.
- Assessment of individuals' need by centre staff is of poor quality, with too little use of the Common Assessment Framework. Only seven examples of this assessment were produced during the

inspection. This is unrealistically low in a population of over 5,500 under-five-year-olds living in areas within the top 30% of deprivation nationally.

- The records indicate that some staff do not understand when to refer their safeguarding concerns to the appropriate agencies. Some records lack detail of the purpose of the visits and the actions set, and this lack of analysis limits the relevance, effectiveness and timeliness of the interventions.
- Leaders acknowledge that there is insufficient focus on promoting parents' knowledge of e-safety and the risks of grooming and child sexual exploitation. This reduces staff's and parents' ability to keep children and families safe.
- Although a programme to promote healthy lifestyles is in place, only a minority of the centre's health targets are met.
- The centre buildings are currently under-used for activities with local families, although partners report that the buildings are a useful resource for their work, for example, as a venue for meetings.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

Inadequate

- The local authority is currently fulfilling the function of an advisory board, while it seeks to establish a more effective model. This means that there is no independent challenge to the centre's managers or to the authority's governance. Governance is weak. The local authority has held regular group meetings with the centre managers, together the manager of another very large centre, to oversee the new model of working. However, the arrangements for systematic challenge, support and holding to account of individual managers are not yet in place.
- Centre managers were unable to produce any records of challenge and support by the local authority. They had no records from the recent past, to show challenge over time, or since the reconfiguration into a 'supercentre.'
- Safeguarding arrangements are inadequate. Some of the seven case files available for scrutiny during the inspection were of poor quality and did not demonstrate that staff fully understand the Local Safeguarding Children's Board's procedures about the onward referral of concerns.
- Performance management and professional supervision are weak at every level. Managers and staff are not held to account sufficiently for their contribution to the targets that are set.
- Although inexperienced, and therefore needing additional support, the managers of the centre do not have individual supervision and performance management. This happens as a group activity for the two managers, together with the manager of the Parr supercentre. No formal records of these sessions are shared with the managers, so there is no audit trail of the agreed support, actions and decisions against which managers can be measured.
- In contrast, performance management of the centre staff team takes place in regular, individual sessions which systematically check on the well-being and welfare of the staff member, discuss caseloads, identify training needs and briefly discuss cases. However, records do not contain any evidence of developmental feedback or of holding the members of staff to account for their contribution to the way that the centre meet its targets or other improvement activity.
- The new managers are highly committed and enthusiastic, but they lack the management and leadership experience necessary for the task of rebuilding the supercentre as a hub of the community. They are rising to the challenge, and have developed a team which is committed to narrowing the outcomes gap for local families by delivering the new ways of working proposed by the managers.
- However, the team is unable to bring about the rapid change across these four centres that is necessary to improve the very low levels of engagement, provision and impact, and to reduce inequalities in their local community.
- The local authority is not helping the centre managers enough to accelerate improvement, for example, through target setting. Although the managers and local authority have identified the areas for improvement accurately, targets are imprecise and most lack measurable success criteria. The centre's action plan does not include many of the areas of improvement identified in the setting's self-evaluation.
- Although the local authority has judged the centre accurately, the managers' self-evaluation is unrealistic. Despite managers knowing that the centre is inadequate, they evaluated themselves too generously. This has limited the team's understanding of and focus on the most important and

urgent actions.

- Too few parents, including those from target groups, are involved in decisions about the development of services. This misses a valuable opportunity to ensure that, from the outset, services are relevant to the local families and their needs.

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.

Centre details

Unique reference number	23020
Local authority	St Helens
Inspection number	450561
Managed by	The local authority

Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	5,526
Centre manager	Claire Roche and Ian Henry
Date of previous inspection	02 March 2011
Telephone number	01744 673444
Email address	claireroche@sthelens.gov.uk ianhenry@sthelens.gov.uk

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