

The Winchester Cluster Children's Centre Group

Hambledon Road, Denmead, Hampshire, PO7 6PN

Inspection dates 19–21 May 2015

Overall effectiveness	This inspection:	Requires improvement	3
	Previous inspection:	Not previously inspected	
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 children's centre group requires improvement. It is not good because:

- Not enough young children in the Happy Valley, Merry-go-Round and Little Petals centre are registered or use services regularly.
- Information about new births in the area is incomplete. This is because health partners are not consistently sharing this information and this limits the group's ability to register children and families at an early stage.
- The number of eligible two-year-olds who take up the offer of free early education at the earliest opportunity is not high enough. Not all of the children who do so are in good or better settings.
- Leaders have not effectively established the specific needs of low income families or households where no one is in employment, an identified priority group. Not enough of those families use the group's services regularly.
- Opportunities for adults to extend their education or training and move on to employment are limited. Systems to track the longer term benefits to adults and young children of having used the group's services are inconsistent.
- Targets set by the local authority and leaders and managers are not focused specifically enough on the impact of the group's work with priority families. The three partnership advisory boards lack a broad enough membership from some key agencies such as early years settings or from priority families to provide effective challenge to the group. This limits the group's capacity to improve more quickly.

This children's centre group has the following strengths:

- The group provides high levels of care, guidance and support for families with often complex needs. As a result, most of these children and families, who need extra support, engage regularly with staff they have come to trust. Parents have very positive views of the impact of the group on their lives.
- Health outcomes are good and improving in terms of the proportion of Reception-age children who are a healthy weight and the number of babies being breastfed at around two months old.
- A far higher proportion of local children achieve a good level of development when they are five than is typical nationally. Parents feel their children are prepared well for school.
- The newly appointed children's services manager has a clear vision for the group. She is ably supported by a small but highly dedicated team of staff.

What does the group need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that at least the large majority of young children in the Happy Valley, Merry-Go-Round and Little Petals area are registered and use group services regularly by:
 - working closely with other agencies to establish the identity of families with young children who are not yet registered
 - establishing why some families do not use services after they have registered.
- Work with health partners and the local authority to ensure new birth information is provided to the group in a timely and consistent way so that babies can be registered as soon as possible and parents engage with services well.
- Work with the local authority to share information about eligible families who are not taking up the offer of free early education at the earliest opportunity and to ensure that all of the children who do so are in good or better early years settings.
- Improve the outcome for parents, especially those in low income families or where no one is in employment, and encourage more to use services regularly by:
 - analysing what services would best meet their education and employability needs
 - establishing strong productive links with partners such as Jobcentre Plus and adult learning to jointly provide services so that more families can be given the support they need
 - ensuring that any links and courses for adults are well advertised in the group's timetable
 - establishing an effective system to share information with other partners to track the longer term impact of the services provided on these priority families.
- The local authority, commissioned service, children's services manager and the partnership advisory board should ensure that targets set are consistent across all documentation. This includes the local authority's annual review, the service delivery plan and the self-evaluation document. Leaders and managers should ensure that where possible, targets are measurable and focused on engaging priority families.
- Widen the membership of the partnership advisory boards so that key partners such as early years settings and parents are regular attendees. Ensure members are knowledgeable, especially in relation to measuring the impact on the group's priority families and to providing effective challenge.

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 Little Petals; Merry-Go-Round; Happy Valley; Sparklers; The Carroll; Sunbeams; Reign and Shine children's centres.

This inspection was carried out by three Additional Inspectors.

The inspectors held meetings with the children's services manager, representatives from Action for Children, the local authority and the partnership advisory boards. They also spoke to several partners, including those from health services, social care and early years settings. They took into account the views of parents and also spoke to volunteers.

The inspectors visited all seven of the main children's centre buildings that make up the cluster. They observed, amongst others, an adult learning session at Merry-Go-Round and a baby clinic at Sunbeams. They also visited two affiliated groups in community venues. A joint observation of a parenting programme session at the Carroll centre was undertaken with one of the co-ordinators. The group's senior management team, representatives from Action for Children and the local authority observed all the team meetings.

The inspectors looked at a range of relevant documentation. This included case files, the group's self-evaluation, service delivery plan and safeguarding policies and procedures.

Inspection team

Joan Lindsay, Lead inspector

Additional Inspector

Patricia Collis

Additional Inspector

Anthony Mundy

Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about the group

Action for Children has been commissioned to manage this group of children's centres on behalf of the local authority since April 2012. Seven centre buildings have been merged into three clusters of children's centres. They are Happy Valley, Merry-Go-Round and Little Petals centre in the south part of Winchester; the Carroll and Sparklers centre in the city of Winchester and Sunbeam and Reign and Shine in rural Winchester. Services are also delivered from a range of other venues such as church halls and community centres. The centres provide early years experiences, family support, adult learning and health services through partnership work and affiliated groups.

The children's services manager oversees this group as well as a separate cluster of children's centres in Eastleigh, also managed by Action for Children but not part of this inspection. She has been in post for seven weeks and is the fifth post holder in the last three years. The team line-managed by the children's services manager consists of two children's centre co-ordinators, six and a half full-time equivalent family support outreach workers, three administration and finance officers and two part-time playworkers who work across the group. There are currently three separate partnership advisory boards in place to assist with governance. However, the intention is to merge the three bodies into one overarching board from September 2015.

There are 5046 children aged under five in the area served by the group, which is very widespread, with the distance between the furthest two points being approximately 35 miles. Of the 57 separate defined areas the group covers, only two are considered to be in the 30% most disadvantaged nationally, whereas 21 are ranked in the 10% most advantaged. A tenth of children under five live in households where no one is in employment, which is well below the national average, but this varies considerably across the group's geographic area. Approximately 15% of families are claiming Working Tax Credit in the area served by the centre which is below national figures. Most children come from a White British background, with no specific ethnic groups making up the remainder. Children generally enter early years provision with skills and knowledge typical for their age.

The group has identified priority children and families needing most support as: parents who were teenagers when they had their first baby; families with young children who have low incomes or are in households where no one is in employment; families living in the two least advantaged areas of the St Luke and St John's/Allsaints wards.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Requires improvement

- Overall, the group has registered 70% of all young children living in the very extensive area it covers. However, this ranges from most children being registered in the Sunbeams and Reign and Shine centre's area to only the majority in the Happy Valley, Merry-Go-Round and Little Petals centre's area. In addition, the number of children and families from this area who make regular use of the group's services is not high enough. The reasons for this low take-up have not been fully established and this aspect requires improvement.
- Families with young children or those expecting babies have regular opportunities to access early health services. A range of midwife and baby clinics are delivered from some of the centres, for example Sunbeams, as well as at affiliated groups. However, although there are systems in place for health services to inform the group about local new births, they do not always work effectively in practice. This limits the group's ability to ensure most children and families are registered at the earliest opportunity so that they can go on to access information, advice and guidance and attend services.
- Most three- and four-year-olds are in early education, but at present, only two thirds of eligible two-year-olds are taking their full entitlement. Although this rises to over three quarters as their third

birthday approaches, it means that not enough derive the full benefit of the offer. The group is not consistently informed about which children are taking up the offer to enable them to provide effective support and guidance. In addition, approximately a quarter of those who take up the offer are in early years settings that are judged to be less than good. This requires improvement.

- The group has identified families on low income and those where no one is in paid employment as a priority to support. However, no detailed assessment of their specific needs has been undertaken and therefore services are not targeted enough to this priority group. As a result, although most of those families are registered, not enough go on to use the group's services regularly.
- The group's work to register and engage the other identified priority families has been more successful. For example, almost all those who were teenagers when they had their first baby are registered, and the majority engage well. Several groups are targeted at supporting them, such as the Young Parent Group. A high proportion take part in structured parenting programmes.
- Most of the families living in the two least advantaged parts of the group's area are registered and the large majority access services. This is because the group has used a range of venues in the community and also supports with transport to other centres to help families attend for specific sessions such as parenting programmes.

The quality of practice and services

Requires improvement

- The quality, range and relevance of services require improvement. This is because the specific needs of priority families identified by the group as those on low income and living in households where no one is working are not fully met.
- Jobcentre Plus are not fully implementing partnership agreements to provide an enhanced service in the Carroll/Sparklers' area. Although some parents have been supported back to work through volunteering at the centres or as a result of being signposted elsewhere, the numbers are too low.
- Opportunities for priority adults to extend their learning are limited. There are child care courses and some classes provided for English and mathematics that are well received by parents but the number who can attend is low in relation to the size of the area covered by the group. Where families have been supported, tracking of the longer-term impact is not detailed enough, partly as a result of a lack of information about progression from other partners.
- The quality of services provided directly by group staff, such as structured parenting programmes, is good. However, a large proportion of the services open to all are now run by affiliated partners. This is because family support outreach workers are now focused on supporting families referred in for one-to-one work rather than running universal sessions. There are service level agreements in place with the affiliated groups. However, they are not robust enough to ensure that standards of delivery can be monitored effectively by senior leaders.
- The percentage of young children who are very overweight is low across the group's area; immunisation rates are high and the number of babies still being breastfed at around two months is well above the national level. The group has a strong focus on healthy lifestyles, for example providing targeted sessions on cooking and encouraging children to exercise through music and movement. Staff are trained to provide effective support to mothers with baby and child feeding problems.
- The outcomes for children are positive. Overall there is a far higher percentage of local children who achieve a good level of development than is typical nationally. This is also the case for specific groups such as children from low income or workless households. The gap between the lowest achieving children and their peers is narrowing so that inequalities are being effectively reduced.
- There are no consistent methods to track children when they move on to the many early years settings and schools in the group's area. However, anecdotal evidence from settings and parents is that specific transition groups and using the group's services regularly ensures children are well prepared for school. Where children are tracked, for example in the crèches, the records are clearly linked to development milestones and show that they make good progress.
- Individual families who are supported by family support outreach workers have good outcomes because they receive effective levels of care, guidance and support. They typically state 'They have been a great help...like a mum to me.' Case records are kept to a high standard and reflect the

families' involvement and views on their progress well.

- Parents have positive views of the centres. Although there are currently only four active volunteers, as some have moved into employment, the support they provide to the group by, for example, helping to run sessions is much valued. At present, however, there is no formal parents' forum and there is under-representation of parents on the partnership advisory boards.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

Requires improvement

- Those who lead and manage the group have not set targets that are consistent or focused enough on improving outcomes for identified priority children and families. For example, the targets set by the local authority at the annual review and the key performance indicators do not link directly with those identified in the group's service delivery plan.
- Leaders have not placed enough regard to ensuring priority families make regular use of the centres' services and if not, why not. As a result, leaders hold an overly optimistic view of the group's performance. This aspect requires improvement to ensure that the group has full capacity to move forward at a more rapid and sustained rate.
- The three partnership advisory boards do not have a clear enough understanding of the group's key priority families or how to monitor the centres' impact on them. Members are very knowledgeable about their own local communities and they provide good support through charity funding. However, there are not enough key partners who attend regularly to provide strong strategic leadership. In addition, too few parents attend meetings to ensure families' views are considered consistently and effectively from across the extensive geographic area.
- The performance management of staff is carried out regularly and effectively. The team feel well supported in this regard. Regular observations and work reviews take place, including rigorous auditing of families' case files. However, leaders have little oversight of services delivered by external providers. Consequently, the quality of those services are variable and do not always meet the needs of priority children and families, in part because of the charges levied to attend.
- The newly appointed children's services manager is already providing strong leadership, following numerous changes in the senior leadership team over the last three years. The size of the group's area, spanning some 35 miles from north to south, provides challenges to managers because of the limited size of the staff team. Staff resources are deployed effectively to meet the needs of children and families who are referred in for targeted support. However, it is recognised that more requires to be done through partnership work to meet the needs of families who have low incomes or who are in households where no one is employed.
- Safeguarding policies and procedures are all robust. Group staff are well trained and effective in supporting families where children are subject to child protection, are considered in need or are looked after. Good levels of information exchange with key agencies such as health and social care also support the group's ability to safeguard vulnerable children. Staff act swiftly and effectively to raise any concerns they may have about the welfare of children. Early help assessments ensure that appropriate partners work together effectively to help families get their lives back on track.
- Parents' views are sought frequently and they are valued by staff. However, there is no formal means to ensure these views are fed through to the partnership advisory boards.

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	80225
Local authority	Hampshire County Council
Inspection number	455143
Managed by	Action For Children on behalf of the local authority

Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	5046
Children's Services Manager	Rebecca Reeve
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Telephone number	02392 269695
Email address	rebecca.reeve@actionforchildren.org.uk

This group consists of the following children's centres:

- URN 21990 Little Petals, Merry-Go-Round and Happy Valley merged centres
- URN 22806 Sparklers and The Carroll merged centres
- URN 22979 Sunbeams and Reign and Shine merged centres

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