

Borders Children's Centre

Sunflower House, Kendal Road, Shrewsbury, SY1 4ES

Inspection dates	16–17 June 2015
Previous inspection date	Not Previously Inspected

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

- Just under half of the children living in the area served by the centre are registered. Children and families from most of the target groups are not yet using the centre's services, or those provided by partners, often enough.
- The number of parents being helped to develop their education, basic skills and to prepare for work, including through volunteering opportunities, is relatively low. The centre has limited information about how well those who do take up courses get on. This restricts the centre's ability to plan appropriate services for the future.
- Despite very strong links with early years settings, the centre gathers only limited information about children's progress over time.
- Leaders and those responsible for governance are not making the best use of the information available to check whether enough children and families from target groups sustain their engagement with the centre. There is no clear plan to drive the centre's increased reach into its community, and this hinders its capacity to build quickly for better effectiveness.

The centre has the following strengths:

- Children enjoy positive learning experiences and are well prepared for school. The gap between children from the poorest backgrounds and others is closing far more quickly than seen nationally.
- One-to-one targeted support is very effective in helping families to overcome the problems they face. Good collaborative work takes place to empower children and families experiencing domestic violence.
- Parents are well supported in building both their confidence and skills in managing behaviour. As a result, this is helping them to become more effective in parenting their children. Good quality advice and guidance raises parents' awareness about how to keep their children healthy and safe.
- Parents are enabled to 'have their say' and help shape services through various means, including through their representatives on the advisory board.
- Centre users are very positive about having services available on their doorstep. They value the good quality of resources and wide range of activities available.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

- Increase the registration, access and sustained engagement of target groups by:
 - seeking accurate and timely data from the local authority about new births in the area so that staff can make early contact and promote what the centre can offer families
 - making sure that staff are clear about their role in increasing the centre's reach
 - working pro-actively with partners to increase the number of children registered with the centre so that most sign up for services
 - capitalising on the developing partnership with Jobcentre Plus to find out about the needs of low income and workless families, and engage the large majority of these in appropriate services
 - ensuring that all contacts are recorded on the management information system so that leaders have a clear view of who is attending regularly and can follow up those who have not been seen for some time.
- Work with adult learning and skills partners to make sure that:
 - the large majority of workless parents and those on low incomes take up of services, including volunteering opportunities, so that their education, employability and life chances improve
 - information is shared between partners about the progress learners make towards achieving personal goals, so that leaders have clear oversight of how well services are improving their economic well-being.
- Build on the good work with schools and early years partners to establish a systematic way of tracking children's progress over time to identify what proportion of children who access centre services achieve a good level of development by the time they are five.
- Improve leadership, management and governance by making sure that:
 - leaders have a firm grasp on the level of engagement of children and families from all target groups and prioritise resources to making necessary improvements
 - an effective action plan is in place to target improvement in priority areas at a brisk pace and is used by the local authority to inform its monitoring of the centre's performance
 - the advisory board has reliable data about the level of engagement of priority groups and the impact that services are having so that they can hold the centre fully to account.

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 locality team lead, senior centre managers, staff, local authority officers, partners, volunteers, parents and members of the advisory board. The team leader post was vacant at the time of the inspection.

The inspectors, together with centre staff, observed activities held at two community venues: the 'Stay and Play' at Honeysuckle Lodge and Elim Toddler Group at Harlescott Grange. Case files were sampled jointly with staff. The centre team manager and two members of the senior leadership team attended all team meetings.

Inspectors took into account a wide range of parents' views as expressed directly to them during the inspection as well as through their recorded evaluations about the centre's work.

Inspectors also looked at a wide range of documentation, data and other information.

Inspection team

Christine Field, Lead inspector

Additional inspector

Karen Cooper

Additional inspector

Anne Ashworth

Additional inspector

Full report

Information about the centre

Borders Children's Centre is managed directly by Shropshire County Council. It comprises three previous stand-alone children's centres: Shrewsbury, Central Shropshire North and part of Central Shropshire West'. The centres were amalgamated in 2013 to serve the needs of families living in the central area of the county. All have been inspected previously and their reports can be found at <http://reports.ofsted.gov.uk>. Borders also collaborates with Roman Way Children's Centre. This involves sharing the team manager, some frontline staff and delivering services in partnership to meet local needs. An advisory board which serves the central locality is in place to assist governance.

The principal site for Borders is at Sunflower House (where the team administrative base is located) with linked sites at Sundorne Infant School, Martin Wilson Primary School, Wilfred Owen Primary School and Richmond House. The centre, with its partners, runs services from seven main sites with a total of 40 different community venues overall. Services provided include activities to promote early learning, family support, child and family health, careers, adult learning and volunteering.

There are 2,447 children under the age of five years living in the area served by the centre. The area, which stretches to the Welsh borders, is largely rural, but with more densely populated communities around the main town of Shrewsbury. The three most deprived areas, Harlescott, Battlegate and Heathgates and Sundorne, are located on the north side of Shrewsbury. The level of unemployment in these areas is above the county average. Families are predominantly White British with approximately four per cent from minority ethnic groups. Most children start nursery with skills and abilities typical for their age.

Target groups identified by the centre are: two-year-olds eligible for free early education; teenage parents; families who are unemployed or on low incomes and children with special needs or disabilities. Additionally, a main priority for the centre currently is the rising number of children affected by domestic abuse.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Requires improvement

- Just under half of children who live in the area served by the centre are registered. Currently only one in four of children under the age of one year are registered. The absence of live birth data restricts the centre's ability to make early contact with the parents of new babies. Health partners have agreed to give the centre more support in signing up the expectant parents and new parents they are in contact with, and who may benefit from what the centre has to offer.
- About two thirds of two-year-olds eligible for free early education take up their entitlement at good or better quality settings. Partnerships with early years providers are very good. However, the centre has not explored in sufficient detail how its services and those of partners might further support the learning and development of those children not accessing their entitlement.
- Teenage parents engage well with the centre and its partners' services, as do children with special educational needs or disabilities. However, the level of engagement by parents who are unemployed or on low incomes is not clear. This is because leaders do not have a firm enough grasp on which of these families are accessing services regularly.
- The team plan includes well-conceived priorities to improve the quality of services but does not give the same attention to increasing the engagement of target groups. This is a missed opportunity to

target required improvement, identify staff roles in moving things forward and ensure that more of the right families sustain contact in the right services until their needs are met.

- Services run from 40 different venues; this means that families have services right on their doorstep. This approach is effective in overcoming the problems faced by some families living in rural isolation. Local knowledge is used well to assess families' needs, especially when problems occur that require specialist support.
- Good support is given to children and families who are most in need. Children subject to a child protection plan are known about, and the centre staff work effectively with multi-agency partners to reduce the risk of harm to the most vulnerable. Particularly effective support ensures that families experiencing domestic violence sustain their contact with appropriate services and are empowered to take control.
- Parents' views are canvassed regularly about what services they require. A recent survey identified that the use of social media might help market services more widely; the centre has responded positively to this and a Facebook page for parents is currently in development.

The quality of practice and services

Requires improvement

- The centre offers a wide range of well located services, but not enough children and families from priority groups take them up. Very few parents, particularly from workless homes, are engaged in courses that will enhance their chances of employment. A group of parents from minority ethnic backgrounds are currently being helped to build their basic skills and spoken English. However, only limited information is held by the centre about their progress and achievements.
- The volunteers who spoke to inspectors were very positive about the centre's support in building their confidence and work experience. However, the training for volunteers is not well planned, promoted or coordinated. This limits the centre's ability to improve its offer and support for those from target groups who see volunteering as the first step towards further education or paid employment.
- A higher proportion of children than seen nationally achieve a good level of development. At 16.5% the achievement gap between those from the poorest backgrounds and others is much narrower than the gap seen nationally. The centre plays a valuable role in reducing inequalities and helping children prepare confidently for the next stage of education.
- The impact of services such as 'Stay and Play' on target children's learning and development is checked regularly by staff and partners during their regular visits. However, the progress that these children make when they transfer to school is not being followed up to see how effective early interventions are in helping them reach a good level of development by the time they are five.
- A large number of parents take up good quality experiences that improve their parenting skills and knowledge about first aid and home safety. Healthy lifestyles are well promoted by specific workshops, for example about the hidden salt and sugar in food, courses such as 'eat better, move more', and the 'forest schools' initiative. Parents told inspectors that they love the idea of celebrating something significant that their child has achieved and are proud to display it on the 'WOW board'.
- A sensible balance has been achieved between services open to everyone and those to meet specific needs. Case studies are well maintained and demonstrate the positive impact that the centre's work has on empowering families in most need and improving their well-being. There is good tracking and follow-up of the progress made by Border's families who access the Freedom programme.

Children's welfare is the focal point of the packages of support provided.

- The centre has very recently begun to use an electronic system to record case work. Prior to this, manager's audits of case file quality has been comprehensive and used effectively to promote best practice, especially in making sure actions are followed up. Quality assurance of the new case files is planned but not yet up and running.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

Requires improvement

- Leaders and those responsible for governance have not been looking critically at whether enough target families are using the centre's services to meet their needs. This means that there is an overly optimistic evaluation of the centre's effectiveness. The limited use of available information and specific data is hindering leaders' ability to plan priority developments and carefully target resources to drive rapid improvement.
- The advisory board is well attended by partners and parents. Meetings are used to share details about partnership work in the locality and to focus on education and health matters in particular. There has been insufficient time devoted to monitoring the performance of the centre in engaging with target groups, and addressing this is a recognised priority.
- The local authority has a clear picture of the centre's effectiveness, although the records of monitoring visits do not entirely show this. The sharing of good practice between children's centres is facilitated particularly well across the county. Effective on-going support for leaders includes coaching to support the team's development. Help is also in place to move swiftly to appoint a team leader to cover the maternity leave of the post-holder'.
- Service level agreements and contracts are appropriately in place with key partners. The centre quality assures the services available for children in some depth and involves early education partners particularly well in the process. Work to promote joined up services that promote parents' employability are at an early stage of development. The new central referral and data capture and analysis system launching in September has potential to support this aspect of the centre's work.
- Good involvement of parents in centre decision-making helps to shape the programme of activities. The recent survey shows high levels of centre user-satisfaction, especially in having services delivered locally. Parents are strong advocates of the centre and value the high quality of resources available. They are keen to promote activities such as the forthcoming 'Party in the Park' in which it is hoped 250 families will participate.
- Safeguarding is at the heart of the centre's policies and practice. Staff vetting procedures are robust. Their work with partners is particularly sound in ensuring children learn safely in the many different venues they attend. The developing early help procedures being introduced across the county involve professionals from different organisations working together to reduce the risk of harm to the most vulnerable children. This includes those subject to a child protection or in need plan. Senior leaders are closely involved at the strategic level of decision-making to make sure that frontline workers are kept fully informed about any changes that occur.

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	22713
Local authority	Shropshire
Inspection number	464589
Managed by	The local authority
Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	2,447
Centre team manager	Julie Duncan
Date of previous inspection	Not Previously Inspected
Telephone number	01743 452400
Email address	julie.duncan@shropshire.gov.uk

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