

Amersham Children's Centre

Bell Lane, Little Chalfont, Buckinghamshire, HP6 6PF

Inspection dates	14–16 July 2015		
Previous inspection date	Not previously inspected		
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 is a centre that requires improvement. It is not good because:

- Not enough children and families from all target groups sustain their engagement in centre services. Information provided by the local authority and Barnardo's about target groups does not align consistently; this inhibits the otherwise robust checks on the centre's performance.
- The planning of activities that promote the learning and development of target children and the systems to track the progress they make over time are at an early stage of development.
- The take-up of courses that are provided to enhance parents' learning and skills is currently too low.
- Too few parents are involved in the work of the advisory board or in supporting strategic decision making.

It has the following strengths:

- The centre provides good support for children and families with the greatest needs, including those subject to 'early help' procedures. There is a strong culture of safeguarding and effective work to reduce the risk of harm to children.
- Parents very much enjoy their time at Amersham. They say the staff are 'fantastic' and that the centre is like 'a family'. Childminders appreciate the useful guidance they receive.
- Health outcomes are promoted very positively, as reflected in the good breastfeeding rates and the relatively low level of childhood obesity.
- The new coordinator provides effective leadership, has set the centre on an improving course and is managing staff changes well. Those responsible for governance are supportive and challenging and play an important role in helping the centre move forward.
- The current contractual changes are being sensitively managed and, as a result, staff morale is positive, with everyone making sure it is 'business as usual' for families.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

- Increase and sustain the engagement of all target groups so that the large majority of children and families access appropriate services until their needs are met. Ensure that the information about the engagement of target groups provided by the local authority and Barnardo's aligns and reliably informs their checks on the centre's performance.
- Sharpen the planning of centre activities to promote the specific learning and development needs of target children, extend the systems for tracking their progress, and work with partners to see how well these children achieve over time.
- Increase parents' take up of adult learning opportunities so that the large majority of those most in need enhance their education, skills and economic well-being.
- Enhance governance by involving more parents in the work of 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. It took place at the same time as the inspection of Beaconsfield Children's Centre and Denham and Gerrards Cross Children's Centre.

This inspection was carried out by two Additional Inspectors.

The inspectors held meetings with the children's centre area manager, staff, Barnardo's senior managers, local authority officers, partners, volunteers, parents and members of the advisory board. The children's centre coordinator, who took up post six months ago and oversees all three centres in the collaboration, was not present until the last day of the inspection.

The inspectors visited a number of activities held in the centre, such as the childminder and nannies group, young parents group and '0 to 1 fun' session. Safeguarding policy, procedures and practice were examined in depth. Inspectors also looked at a wide range of other documentation.

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

The children's centre area manager, a colleague area manager and a coordinator of another cluster supporting the inspection in the absence of the centre coordinator attended all lead and team inspectors' meetings.

Inspection team

Christine Field, Lead Inspector

Additional Inspector

Peter Towner

Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about the centre

Amersham Children's Centre opened in 2009. Barnardo's manages the centre on behalf of the local authority, along with 15 others in the county. The management team consists of the assistant director, the area manager and the local services coordinator. The coordinator is responsible for overseeing the team of staff who works across the areas served collaboratively by three children's centres—Beaconsfield, Denham and Gerrards Cross, and Amersham. Each centre has its own advisory board to assist governance.

Services provided by the centre and in partnership with other local providers include activities to promote early learning, family support, child and family health, careers, adult learning and volunteering. The centre shares a site with Chalfont Valley E-ACT Primary Academy (URN 138583) and registered childcare Little Breaks (EY 418928). They are inspected under separate arrangements and their reports can be found at <http://reports.ofsted.gov.uk>.

Beaconsfield Children's Centre and Denham and Gerrards Cross Children's Centre were inspected at the same time as Amersham.

There are 1,481 children under the age of five years living in the area served by the centre, which is mainly affluent but with pockets of disadvantage. The reach area includes the wards of Amersham Common, Amersham Town, Penn and Coleshill, Amersham on the Hill and Little Chalfont. Amersham on the Hill and Little Chalfont are identified as being the least advantaged areas. There are a number of social housing estates, including Chiltern Heights, Park Place and the Black Horse Avenue estate. Some 9% of children in the area are living in homes where no one is in paid work. Most families are White British. Children enter early education provision with skills and knowledge typical for their age.

Target groups identified by the centre are: two-year-old children eligible for free education; children receiving Early Help support; children living in the least advantaged area of Little Chalfont; and, young parents.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Requires improvement

- Overall, a large majority of families are registered with the centre, but data show that only a third of children under the age of one are signed up for services. Access to services requires improvement because not enough children and families from all target groups use services regularly.
- The centre has rightly pinpointed that the children living in one of the least advantaged areas in Little Chalfont are a key group for its services. However, currently only a third of these children have visited the centre five times or more in the last year. The engagement of young parents paints a similar picture, with only a quarter in ongoing contact.
- The health visiting team and midwives run clinics from the centre every week, providing a wide-range of pre- and post-natal services for parents, including those expecting babies. Timely referrals of any parents requiring additional support are made to the centre, which works in close collaboration with the health visiting team to ensure children's safety and families' well-being.
- There is good engagement with children receiving Early Help support, including children in need and those subject to a child protection plan once they are known to the centre. Families who receive one-to-one support because of their specific needs speak highly of the good assistance provided by the family support worker, centre staff and partners, which helps to overcome the complex challenges they face, including domestic violence and substance misuse.
- All three- and four-year-olds living in the area served by the centre take up their free early education places in mainly good or better quality provision, as do most eligible two-year-olds. The centre knows about most two-year-olds because of its strong partnership with early years settings, but only a minority uses its services regularly. The centre is aware that the outcomes for children from the poorest backgrounds are much less positive than those achieved by their peers, but has

yet to give sufficient focus to planning specific services that meet the learning and development needs of this group.

The quality of practice and services

Requires improvement

- The centre has an appropriate programme of activities and balances them sensibly with its tailored support for families who are most in need. However, not enough children and families from target groups use the centre's good quality services often enough, and this requires improvement.
- At 64.3%, the proportion of Reception-age children who achieved a good level of development in 2014 was slightly above the local authority and national averages. However, only a third of children eligible for free school meals achieved this, and the gap in achievement with others is not closing quickly enough. There is a clear emphasis on the prime areas of learning, and particularly communication and language development, in centre planning, but not enough attention is given to meeting target children's development needs or their next steps in learning.
- The systems to track the progress that target children make are not yet fully effective. Staff are good role models in sessions such as '0 to 1 fun' and encourage children to build confidence and independence. However, their observations tend to focus on what a child is doing rather than what they are learning. Work is at a very early stage to develop learning journeys, which currently focus on raising young parents' awareness about their children's age and stage of development.
- Family learning opportunities, such as first aid, attract a lot of parents; some 86 have benefited over the last 12 months. A few parents are helped to improve their life chances by accessing appropriate courses to build confidence, English language skills and readiness for work; but, numbers are low. Volunteering is a positive feature of the centre's response to meeting parents' personal needs. Nine are currently active, with some previous volunteers progressing to paid work.
- The care, guidance and support for families are good. High quality, well displayed information, such as how to 'bin the bottle' and 'ditch the dummy', is readily available for centre users. Parenting skills are also well addressed by one-to-one work or by specific programmes, such as 'Holding hands', which focus on quality family time and positive management of children's behaviour.
- Case files are maintained to a good standard and show clearly the effective multi-agency work, for example with the family resilience team, that is taking place to support those most in need. Centre leaders are proactive in escalating any concerns they have with social care to ensure children are well protected.
- The centre contributes well to improving health outcomes, as reflected in the well-above average proportion (65%) of mothers who sustain breastfeeding their babies at six to eight weeks. Workshops, such as 'Enough is enough', usefully raise awareness about the value of healthy eating. At 6%, the level of childhood obesity is well below the national average.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

Requires improvement

- The centre has experienced major changes in staffing, with the team not fully operational until five months ago. Currently, staff are coming to terms with the outcomes of the re-commissioning of all Buckinghamshire's children's centres. The new centre coordinator has already proved effective in driving improvements in registrations, re-kindling partnerships and ensuring good quality practice is maintained. She has not yet been so effective in securing the sustained engagement of all target groups, or in fully tracking some aspects of the centre's work, and these are aspects that require improvement.
- The new staff team works well together and is very focused on doing its best for children and families. Induction arrangements work well; regular supervision and well-targeted staff training ensure that both individual needs and centre priorities are addressed.
- The local authority generally provides effective support and challenge. Regular performance checks are undertaken and information about which families are registered is provided at contract meetings. However, the focus on defining how well targets groups' needs are being met by their sustained engagement in services could be more rigorous, as could the follow up of recommended actions arising from the annual conversation review.

- Centre service planning is very detailed and is based on effective self-review processes and robust quality assurance. Leaders visit sessions to 'touch base', partners such as adult learning and early years teachers observe sessions, and members of the advisory board drop in on activities and share their findings at board meetings. This is all helping to maintain quality during a period of major change and when resources are being stretched to the full.
- Governance is well established. The role of the advisory board has recently been reviewed and the board's membership increased to include wider partner representation. The next step, which has been clearly planned, is for more parents to play a heightened role in strategic decision making.
- Safeguarding is given high status in the staff's work with children and families. Policies and procedures meet current requirements. All staff are fully trained in child protection matters, including e-safety. Timely information about children who are looked after, subject to a child protection plan or in need is now shared with the centre by social care. This means care packages can be dovetailed appropriately.
- There are plenty of ways for parents to have their say. For example, the afternoon 'play in the park' sessions came about following a consultation opportunity in which parents made this suggestion. Parents very much enjoy their time at Amersham. They say how friendly and welcoming everyone is and that the centre is their 'lifeline'.
- Childminders also appreciate the useful guidance they receive and told inspectors that displays about children's health, well-being, learning and development are 'fresh, relevant and changed regularly'.

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	20084
Local authority	Buckinghamshire
Inspection number	455079
Managed by	Barnardo's on behalf of the local authority

Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	1,481
Centre Coordinator	Sarah Dunmur
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Telephone number	01494 773068
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