

Northumberland – Blyth Valley Children's Centre Group

103 Wright Street, Blyth, Northumberland, NE24 1HG

Inspection dates	30 September–02 October 2014
Previous inspection date	Not previously inspected

Overall effectiveness	This inspection:	Inadequate	4
	Previous inspection:	Not previously inspected	
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 children's centre group is inadequate.

- Leaders and the advisory board do not quality assure or monitor the centre's work with sufficient rigour. They are unable to evaluate services effectively and accurately or measure whether activities provided by the centre are making a positive difference to the lives of the children and families who use it.
- Data and information available from the local authority and key partners is not being used effectively to plan and improve services and provision. Nor is information used sharply enough to: accurately identify those families most in need of support or harder to reach families who are less likely to use services; assess needs; reduce health and education inequalities or ascertain the participation rates and levels of sustained engagement by families and priority groups.
- There are not enough places for eligible two-year-olds to take up their free entitlement to early education across the locality. Only a minority of children take up their entitlement. Links with other early years providers and local primary schools, in particular, are underdeveloped.
- Not enough parents are routinely involved in decision making.
- Recent local authority changes to performance monitoring strategies for children's centres have not yet had any impact and it is too early to see how quickly improvements can be made.

This children's centre group has the following strengths:

- Safeguarding is prioritised well. Centre staff work closely with key partners to safeguard vulnerable children and adults. Family support workers' timely and effective action leads to good early intervention and support. This has a positive impact on children and families. Case files and records are maintained to a high standard.
- Parents highly value the range of services available and the care, guidance and support they receive from the committed, well-qualified and experienced staff team.
- Families have access to well-resourced centres and transport and a wide range of learning opportunities are available to improve their social, personal and employability skills.

What does the centre/group need to do to improve further?

- Improve leadership, governance and management of the centre group by:
 - reviewing, refining and streamlining systems and documentation in order to sharpen decision making, planning and performance monitoring
 - implementing strategies that will assess community needs and target services for priority groups more effectively and increase the participation of harder to reach families and communities
 - providing sharp evaluations that show trends over time, accurately monitor and report take-up, participation and sustained engagement rates for all centre activities and the extent to which the services provided have improved the lives of families, particularly those the centre has identified as most in need of help and support
 - helping centre staff to develop the skills and confidence needed to collate, interrogate and analyse data and information accurately and consistently so that they are fully equipped to contribute to ongoing quality assurance and performance management activities
 - ensuring the advisory board is fit for purpose, includes the active participation of key partner agencies, particularly education and health professionals, and members clearly understand the role of the board in supporting and holding centre leaders to account for all aspects of its work
 - ensuring parents are actively involved in decision making and governance of the centre
 - ensuring all services delivered by the centre are monitored closely and are of consistently good, or better, quality.

- Work with the local authority, health and early years partners to:
 - improve health outcomes for young children and their families
 - build effective relationships with local primary schools, childminders and other early years providers and engage them more fully in centre developments, activities and governance
 - increase the number of children taking up their free entitlement to early education in the local community
 - ensure clear records are in place to demonstrate children's learning and progress from their initial starting points and use data effectively to identify any gaps in children's learning
 - make better use of data and links with feeder schools to clearly demonstrate the impact of children's centre services on improving children's readiness for school and how the centre is working with partners towards closing the attainment gap between the most disadvantaged children and the rest.

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 Blyth Central, Blyth West, Cramlington East, Cramlington West and Seaton Valley.

This inspection was carried out by two of Her Majesty’s Inspectors and two additional inspectors.

The inspectors held meetings with centre managers, centre staff, family support workers, officers from the local authority and Barnardos, health and education professionals, parents and representatives from the advisory board.

The inspectors visited all five centres and Colgate Cottage which is one of the community venues that the children’s centre also uses to deliver services. Inspectors observed the centres’ work and looked at a range of relevant documentation including self-evaluation forms, action plans and data, safeguarding policies and procedures and a sample of case files.

Inspection team

Wendy Ripley, Lead inspector

Her Majesty’s Inspector

Jayne Utting

Her Majesty’s Inspector

Eileen Grimes

Additional inspector

Joan Cawdron

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Full report

Information about the group

The Northumberland-Blyth Valley Children's Centre group was established in 2012 when five children centres were brought together under shared leadership and management. It is run by Barnardos on behalf of the local authority. The Blyth Valley Children's Centre locality manager oversees all of the centres in the group, supported by a team of managers who have responsibility for specific centres and different operational aspects of the centres' work. Within the last 12 months, the local authority has reorganised how it oversees its children's centres and restructured staff roles and responsibilities.

The centre group works in partnership with a number of organisations to provide a range of activities open to all families and those especially designed for those groups identified as most in need. These include: stay and play activities, family support services, adult education and health promotion programmes. Some services are delivered in other venues within the local community and through outreach work with families in their own homes. Cramlington East, Cramlington West and Seaton Valley share the same sites as primary schools, although they are subject to separate inspection arrangements. Early years provision is also provided by Barnardos on the same sites as Blyth Central (Blyth Central Pre-school) and Blyth West (Barnardos nursery @ Blyth West; Bizzy Bees Pre-school). These settings were not inspected at the same time as the centres. Inspection reports can be accessed at www.ofsted.gov.uk.

Blyth Valley serves around 4,500 children under five years of age living in Blyth, Cramlington and Seaton Delaval. Most families are of White British heritage. The communities served by the centre group include areas of high deprivation and unemployment. Around 38% of families live in areas that are deemed to be among the least advantaged areas of the country. About 28% of children under five live in households that are workless and dependent on benefits; this is much higher than the national average. The centres' main priority groups are: children living in workless households, teenage parents, fathers, children with disabilities or in need of early help, and children and families of minority ethnic heritage. Children's skills, knowledge and abilities on entry to early years provision are generally below those typical for their age.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Inadequate

- Registration and participation rates have increased steadily. This is because of effective and timely sharing of information such as live birth data and close working relationships with health and other professionals. As a result, most families in the locality, including those expecting children, are known to the centre.
- Local authority data confirm that the centre group has engaged the large majority of families in centre activities. Centre leaders and advisory board members do not know the extent to which children and families, particularly those families identified as most in need of support, have sustained purposeful engagement in centre activities. Nor do they know whether this has resulted in positive outcomes for them.
- Centre leaders have not identified the families who are most in need of support well enough. As a result, opportunities to target resources effectively are missed. Consequently, the participation rates for some target groups including workless families, fathers, teenage parents, children with disabilities and families of minority ethnic heritage are too low. Some priority groups such as those at risk from domestic abuse have been overlooked and opportunities to engage harder to reach families have also been missed.
- Not enough two-year-old children eligible for funded early years education access provision across the locality. Take-up in the area served by Seaton Valley is particularly low. This means some children are not accessing services they are entitled to. Across the locality, not enough is being done by the local authority, the children's centre and other partners to help these children develop the

skills, abilities and confidence they need for school. Centre leaders were unable to provide inspectors with information about the take-up of the free entitlement for children eligible for three- and four-year-old education.

The quality of practice and services

Inadequate

- Centre users’ participation and engagement, learning outcomes and successes are not tracked with sufficient rigour. Consequently, centre leaders are unable to effectively demonstrate that the provision on offer is improving life chances and reducing inequalities.
- For those who do attend, all five centres provide an appropriate range of sessions that are open to all, and services specifically for those identified as most in need. Good quality displays provide helpful general information, advice and guidance.
- The ‘Hub’ in the Blyth Central Children’s Centre provides families from across the group with an opportunity to register births and make use of a credit union. Information, advice and guidance on more specialised services, particularly for employability, debt advice, housing and mental health services are readily available.
- A range of parenting programmes are offered to help parents support their children’s health, development, well-being and safety. Play and learning provision such as ‘SPLAT’ (stay, play learn altogether), ‘toddle time’, ‘early talk’ and ‘boys boys boys’ are provided to support children’s learning and development. The centre is not routinely tracking the progress individual children or groups of children make when they attend such sessions. Therefore, it is difficult to tell what difference they are making or if they are helping to provide children with the skills they need to be ready for nursery or school.
- Parents who attend the Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) group report being effectively supported, helped ‘through some dark days’ and empowered to access services and the professionals they need to support their children and the wider family.
- Comprehensive case files and case studies provide compelling evidence of the family support teams’ positive contribution to the delivery of early help and successful partnership work with wider children’s services. Referrals, observations and assessments are thorough and used sensitively. Families’ views are listened to and taken into account. Parents comment on the sensitive approach and breadth of knowledge of family support workers.
- While the large majority of children attending the centre or its linked early years provision took up their two-year-old health check in 2013–14, the impact of the centre’s work with its partners to improve health outcomes for children and families is less effective. Support is available to help parents understand the importance of healthy eating and how to adopt a healthy lifestyle. Nonetheless, too few health specific targets are set or routinely monitored to measure centre performance. Data indicate there is more work to do to improve breastfeeding rates, reduce smoking during pregnancy and to help reduce the above national rates of obesity found among children in the locality when they start school.
- Sessions such as ‘keeping up with the kids’ provide a good range of creative ideas for parents to use in supporting their children’s development. The majority of parents from the 30% most deprived wards access opportunities to improve their English and mathematics. Sessions delivered by Northumberland Adult Learning Service successfully promote adults’ learning. This service collates clear access, participation and outcome information. However, this is not being used by centre leaders to inform planning, development and evaluation.
- A number of volunteers work within the centre group and this enables the children’s centre to offer more activities and services such as breastfeeding peer support, for example. Volunteers are carefully vetted, well supported and access a range of training, which supports the pathway into employment.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

Inadequate

- Centre leaders do not evaluate the full impact of the services being provided or monitor the quality

of activities rigorously enough. The data and information that is available is not analysed and interpreted effectively or used meaningfully to inform performance management and planning. Local needs and priorities are not identified sharply enough. Targets are not always appropriate and some are being missed. Participation rates and outcomes are not recorded and monitored in sufficient detail to demonstrate sustained engagement or evidence impact.

- The local authority is providing a strategic steer for its children's centres and has established performance management criteria for children's centres throughout Northumberland. These are not yet embedded in this children's centre group. Local authority and Barnardos strategic leaders do work together. However, each organisation has different requirements and this means that a variety of systems and processes are in use at present. Numerous descriptive rather than evaluative reports and plans are produced, but taken collectively these are unreliable, especially when compared to each other, because they very often contain contradictory information and data.
- In its current state, and taking account of weaknesses in the information it receives, the board is unable to demonstrate it has the capacity to challenge and support the work of the centre group, or secure the improvements required. The board does not include any representatives from primary schools or local early years providers. Attendance at meetings by other key partners is often low. Parents who are members of the advisory board are complimentary about the support and encouragement they have received in order to undertake their role.
- The culture of safeguarding is well embedded. Parents state they feel safe and secure when accessing services. The welfare of children and vulnerable adults is at the forefront of Blyth Valley’s purpose. This is clearly demonstrated by the effectiveness of targeted early help and support, particularly for those subject to a child protection plan, Common Assessment Framework, children in the care of the local authority and those children identified as in need. Safeguarding arrangements across the locality are robust and underpinned by suitable policies, procedures and practices.
- In the main, staff are provided with appropriate continuous professional development opportunities that are relevant to their roles. There is more to be done to help staff develop the skills required to enable them to contribute fully to quality assurance and performance management activities.
- There are effective partnerships with most agencies including the Northumberland Adult Learning Service, health, children's social care, victim support, housing and mental health services.
- Links with local schools are less effective and their engagement is very limited. A consequence of this is that the attainment and progress of children using the centre is not being tracked as they progress into school. As a result, the centre is unable to demonstrate the extent to which the activities being provided are helping to prepare children for school and narrow achievement gaps between the lowest performing 20% of children and their peers.
- Parents have limited opportunities to influence decision making. The centre group does not have a Parents Forum but staff respond well to feedback from parents. ‘You say: we did’ displays demonstrate to centre users their feedback has shaped provision to meet their needs. The ‘innovation fund’, a dedicated grant system the centre operates, allows parents to apply for an amount of money to organise specific one-off events such as educational trips and visits; and these are well attended.

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	80045
Local authority	Northumberland
Inspection number	452218
Managed by	Barnardos on behalf of the local authority

Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	4,509
Centre leader	Jean Hedley
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Telephone number	01670 798800
Email address	jean.hedley@barnardos.org.uk

This group consists of the following children’s centres:

- 20352 Blyth Central Children’s Centre
- 20353 Blyth West Children’s Centre
- 20848 Cramlington East Children’s Centre
- 20850 Cramlington West and Village Children’s Centre
- 22658 Seaton Valley Children’s Centre

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