

Stoke on Trent – South Locality Children's Centre Group

c/o Crescent Children's Centre, Pinewood Crescent, Meir, Stoke, ST3 6HZ

Inspection date		26–28 November 2013	
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:

- Centres are not working with all families who may need support. This is because leaders have not identified enough target groups of children and families. The participation of some groups is not always tracked well.
- Activities, services, and links with partners have not made enough difference to local rates of children's obesity and the attainment of children by the age of five years.
- Some checks by leaders are not good enough. As a result, there are some inconsistencies in the quality of centre services, including in the quality of teaching for adults, and family case files.
- While safeguarding meets minimum requirements, some checks of site safety, the safety of exits, and the clarity of safeguarding notice boards for families are only adequate. In addition, supervision given to staff is not always good because leaders have not trained in how to give such support.
- Reviews of the centre by leaders, including the use of data, are not always precise, comprehensive or self-critical enough. As a result, some self-evaluation is not clear or wholly accurate.
- Monitoring of the long-term impact of the centres upon children and parents is not developed fully.

This children's centre group has the following strengths:

- Groups for parents to learn and play with their children are good. There is good sharing of information with parents to help them to understand child development, patterns in children's play and how to support their children's learning.
- Families can access a wide range of support about parenting and employment. Consequently, centres are beginning to improve people's lives and are regarded highly by local people.
- Access to services, and the quality of activities is improving because staff and leaders are keen to learn. Advice and support from the local authority is helpful, and parents are confident to challenge centre leaders at advisory board meetings.
- Parents' views are highly valued, for example, through parent forums. A typical parent comment is, 'I felt like a nobody. Now I feel like a somebody'.

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 Blurton Children’s Centre, Crescent Children’s Centre, Fenton Children’s Centre, Grange Children’s Centre, Hanford Children’s Centre, Treehouse Children’s Centre and, Westfield Children’s Centre.

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

The inspectors held meetings with staff, leaders, partners, and representatives of the advisory board, parent forums and the local authority. The inspectors visited each of the centres. They observed the centres’ work, spoke informally with parents and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

At the time of the inspection, the group coordinator was on long-term leave and the role was covered by other leaders from the centre group, supported by the local authority lead officer for children’s centres.

Inspection team

Tim Vaughan	Her Majesty's Inspector, Lead Inspector
Debora Barazetti-Scott	Her Majesty’s Inspector
Marinette Bazin	Additional Inspector
Mary Dudley	Additional Inspector
Janet Stacey	Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about the group

Stoke on Trent South Locality is a children’s centre group consisting of seven children’s centres, that share one overall children centre coordinator and one advisory board. Each centre has its own parent’s forum. Centres provide a range of family support services, play and learning activities, adult learning and health promotion activities. They also signpost families to other relevant services. Four of the centres have a sensory room, one provides a community café and one has an allotment. Children enter early years provision with a range of skills that are either below or broadly in line with those expected for their age.

The centre group serves 6,794 children under five years of age living within 66 super output areas. Of these areas, 44 are ranked in the top 30% poorest areas in the country. The proportion of young children who live in households where no one is working is 22%. Data demonstrates that the population is mostly White British with a small number of children and families from a range of minority ethnic groups.

Crescent Children’s Centre is in Meir North and shares a site with The Crescent Academy and with The Crescent Pre-School Nursery. It was designated as a phase one centre in March 2006. Grange Children’s Centre is in Meir. It shares a site on the same campus with Sandon Primary School and an early years setting - Stepping Stones (Grange). Grange Nursery School is also on the same campus. The centre was designated as a phase three children’s centre in July 2009. Fenton Children’s Centre is located in the town of Fenton and was designated as a phase two centre in March 2008. The centre includes a crèche registered with Ofsted. Hanford Children’s Centre shares a site with Priory Primary School in Trentham. It was designated as a phase three centre in July 2009. Blurton Children’s Centre is located in Blurton and shares a site with Blurton Primary School, a community centre and Jack in the Box Day Nursery. It was designated as a phase one centre in June 2005. Treehouse Children’s Centre is located in Bentilee. It was designated as a phase one centre in March 2006. It shares a building with a maintained school, Bentilee Nursery School and with an early years setting, Tiny Toez @ Treehouse. The centre also includes a crèche registered with Ofsted. Westfield Children’s Centre is located in the town of Longton. It shares a site with Tiny Toez @ Westfield and provides a crèche registered with Ofsted. The centre was designated as a phase one centre in March 2006. None of the linked schools or early years settings was inspected as part of this inspection; their reports are available at www.ofsted.gov.uk.

What does the group need to do to improve further?

- Identify more clearly all the target groups of children and families whom the centres should target for support and monitor and review how much that they access services.

- Build upon existing links with partners to:
 - reduce levels of obesity among children in the Reception Year at local schools
 - improve attainment and narrow the gaps between children by the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage across the area
 - improve the quality of teaching at centre groups so that all adults are taught well.

- Improve governance, leadership and management by:
 - increasing the amount of checks on the work of staff and partners, giving feedback and checking that improvements are made, including in case file recording of family support
 - ensuring that all checks of site safety, the safety of exits, and the quality of safeguarding notice boards for families are developed well
 - providing supervision training for all relevant staff and ensuring that supervision practice is always good or better
 - giving more training to leaders about self-evaluation to help them develop a full and accurate understanding of the strengths and areas for improvement for the centre group, including how to use centre data to judge progress
 - increase monitoring of the long-term impact of the centre group upon children and families.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Requires improvement

- The centre group has only defined target groups as those families living in the poorest areas, and teenage parents. This view is too simplistic because the make-up of the local area is more complex. Consequently, not all families who need support are using services.
- While information is collected on the participation of groups such as fathers and those from a minority ethnic background, this information is not used well to analyse needs, develop services and increase attendance.
- Levels of registration and engagement are improving. The most recent data indicates that a majority of families from the poorest parts of the area, including teenage parents, are now using specialist or universal services. Outreach work to offer universal services such as community playgroups, is beginning to be successful in engaging families, who might otherwise be reluctant to use centre activities.
- Families who use the centres have good access to a range of professional advice, guidance and support from staff and partner agencies. Centre leaders have established close partnership work with health colleagues. This is helping expectant and new mothers to access a helpful range of health services at centres. As a result, the take-up of appointments has increased.
- Centres help families who are eligible, to take up their free entitlement to good quality early years places. Consequently, a large majority of eligible two-year-olds are accessing funded places in the local area and there is a high demand for places for three-year-olds.
- Imagery used in displays throughout the centres reflects the commitment to equality and diversity and help a wide range of people to feel valued and respected, including those from minority ethnic groups. Wonderful large photographs of local young children, deeply involved in their learning are used well on the walls across the centres.

The quality of practice and services

Requires improvement

- While close work with health colleagues is beginning to improve levels of breastfeeding and reduce smoking in the home, child obesity is increasing.
- The work of the centre group to support children’s learning in centres, schools and early years settings has not had enough impact upon what children achieve by the age of five years. As a consequence, there are wide variations in the attainment of young children living in South Stoke.
- Checks by leaders on the quality of services are not always good enough. As a consequence, there are some inconsistencies in the quality of practice across the centre group. For example, teaching in some adult learning groups requires improvement and, the standard of case file recording of support for families is variable.
- The centre generally provides a good balance of universal and targeted services to reduce inequalities and to improve families’ life chances. These include a good range of activities to improve parenting skills for adults, including teenage parents. As a result, one parent said, ‘Life was a bit rubbish before but, because of the children’s centre, I can now see light at the end of the tunnel’.
- Early help assessments and action plans identify needs well and provide a clear focus to improve outcomes for children and families with the most need. The centre group works closely with partner agencies to tackle housing issues, substance misuse and domestic abuse. Consequently, families receive appropriate support, and in many cases, this prevents problems from escalating. Where safeguarding concerns are identified, these are recognised promptly and raised with social workers.
- Across the centres, staff give good care, guidance and support to parents. Through the ‘Growing Together’ groups, parents are supported very well to understand the patterns in their children’s play, how these are part of child development, and how to support their own children’s learning. A typical parental comment was, ‘I understand what my child is doing when they play and how I can help’.

- For those parents taking adult learning courses, the initial assessment of their needs is good and specialist support is used as appropriate to ensure that individuals can continue to attend. Through training and good access to volunteering opportunities, local people report feeling happier; in whom they are and what they can achieve. As a result, parents develop their employability skills well, with nearly a quarter of adult learners entering paid employment and/ or a volunteer placement.
- Centre staff work closely with the local authority to promote improvement in those early years settings that link with the children’s centre group. Where issues are identified, centres take swift action to give intense support for providers, including frequent visits to check on progress. New families are not encouraged to take-up places until clear improvements are made.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

Requires improvement

- Centre leaders know the main strengths of the centre group, and priorities for their work. However, their evaluation of how well the centre group is doing is sometimes too broad or generous. Furthermore, data available to the centres are not always used well to judge improvement, and monitoring of the long-term impact of services is under-developed.
- Safeguarding work across the centres meets minimum requirements. Staff access to training about child protection and checks on staff suitability, are good. Safeguarding policies for staff are clear. However, some aspects of safeguarding do not demonstrate good practice. For example, inspectors identified some minor weaknesses in checks of site safety, the safety of exits and the clarity of noticeboards promoting safeguarding information to parents.
- Leaders give supervision regularly to staff but have not been trained to do so. As a consequence, supervision does not always take an overview of the case and help staff to focus sufficiently on the impact on children of parental behaviours. Discussion about the history of the family, how the worker feels and children’s development are not always prioritised sufficiently.
- The local authority has taken clear steps to strengthen its oversight of the children’s centre group. As a result, the quality of services and access by families are beginning to improve. The annual discussion with the local authority has guided improvements in the work of the centre group in recent months. Centre leaders are positive, keen to learn and already working with the local authority to improve self-evaluation.
- Close links are developed with other agencies at all levels of provision, including comprehensive information sharing with multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARAC). There are good links with social care about local children who are in care, or identified as being in need, or subject to a child protection plan. As a result, there is evidence that these children’s lives are improving well. Where families need specific support, the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) is used fully to identify their needs.
- Members of the advisory board know the main strengths and weaknesses of the centre group and visit regularly. They take an adequate overview of safeguarding and staff performance. They are supportive of the centre and ask challenging questions of leaders about services, targets and priorities. Their sense of the success of services depends mostly upon reports from centre leaders, whose own self-evaluation is a little too positive. However, members are not complacent and are keen to develop their roles further. They understand the data adequately because they ask questions at meetings. They know that the centre group is beginning to improve the lives of local families, and that much remains to do.
- The centre group benefits from good-sized, attractive, modern buildings in helpful locations for reaching families. Centres share their buildings with other organisations and this arrangement is helping to give value for the money spent on centre services. Staff expertise is deployed well. Resources are generally sufficient and used appropriately to meet priorities.
- The centre group places high value upon involving parents in the life of the centres. This includes active parent forums, high levels of representation and engagement at the advisory board and opportunities to volunteer and to lead activities, for example, Tea and Toast. As a consequence, the centres are regarded highly by local people, and parents feel consulted, listened to and respected.

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	80354
Local authority	Stoke-on-Trent
Inspection number	427649
Managed by	The Local Authority
Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	6,792
Centre leader	Nadine Massey
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Telephone number	01782 596421
Email address	nadine.massey@stoke.gov.uk

This group consists of the following children’s centres:

- URN 23019 Blurton Children’s Centre
- URN 20864 Crescent Children’s Centre
- URN 21158 Fenton Children’s Centre
- URN 23193 Grange Children’s Centre
- URN 23352 Hanford Children’s Centre
- URN 23076 Treehouse Children's Centre
- URN 23538 Westfield Children’s Centre

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