

# Norfolk - AfC Central (Lot 33)

Breckland District Resource Base, London Road, Dereham, NR19 1AS

**Inspection date** 26–27 November 2013

<b>Overall effectiveness</b>	<b>This inspection:</b> Previous inspection:	<b>Requires improvement</b>	<b>3</b>
		Not previously inspected	
Access to services by young children and families		Good	2
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 Select. It is not good because:

- The local authority does not routinely share information about the children and families who have social care involvement, such as children subject to child protection plans. As a result, the centres are not able to support all families who may benefit from what they offer.
- Managers do not make sufficient use of monitoring and evaluation to improve the quality of services. Recording of information requires improvement, so the quality and impact of targeted intervention to help vulnerable children and their families is inconsistent.
- Partnerships with schools and early years providers in the centres' reach area are not as good as they should be. This limits the centre's work in raising the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile scores and making sure children are ready for school.
- The centre does not capture adults and childrens views systematically so these can be used to shape services.

### This children's centre group has the following strengths:

- Leaders have high aspirations for the group and good plans in place to make sure the group improves. Their understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of each centre is good and overall management of the group is sound.
- Leaders have made effective use of available information to review and prioritise what they offer. As a result, they have significantly increased the number of families that are in contact with the centres in a short period of time. They are focused on helping as many families as possible, including target families, and know that getting them registered and involved is the first step.
- Parents value highly the care, guidance and support they receive and feel welcome when accessing services. Parents comment on the trusting relationships they build with staff and how they are supported to make difficult changes in their lives.

## 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. The centres that form part of this children's centre group are Dereham Central, Dereham South and Litcham Children's Centre.

This inspection was carried out by two of Her Majesty's Inspectors and one Additional Inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the group leaders, representatives from the local authority and advisory board, centre staff, partner agency representatives, parents and centre users. They looked at a range of relevant documentation such as self-evaluation and development plans, safeguarding policies and procedures, a sample of case files and case studies. They visited provision on-and-off-site and carried out a joint observation of practice. Senior staff attended all of the inspection team meetings.

## Inspection team

Sue Smith Lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
John Mitchell	Her Majesty's Inspector
Robert Miller	Additional inspector

## Full report

### Information about the group

Norfolk - AfC Central is a group of children's centres in Norfolk run by the charity Action for Children on behalf of the local authority. The group is made up of three centres: Dereham Central and Litcham which are phase two children's centres, and Dereham South a phase three centre. Action for Children has been responsible for running the children's centre group since October 2012. The centres have had changes in staff including a new group service coordinator who started in April 2013. There is one advisory board and the children's centre group offers a range of services to meet its core purpose.

Services are provided at each of the centres and at community venues, including Robertson Barracks, village halls, local schools, pre-schools and toddler groups.

The centres are open each week day from 9.00am to 5.00pm, for 51 weeks of the year. Dereham Central and Dereham South Children's Centres operate from the same premises; the Breckland District Resources Base. Litcham Children's Centre is in the grounds of Litcham Primary School. Litcham Primary School is federated with Litcham High School. There are no linked registered early years providers.

There are 2,411 children under five years of age living in the area the centres serve. This includes rural and urban areas, with the market town of Dereham being the most densely populated. Local employment opportunities tend to be low paid, unskilled and often seasonal resulting in the need to travel significant distances to access higher paid or skilled work.

Around 18.4% of children are living in households dependant on workless benefits. Transport links are limited and can be a barrier to accessing services. Most of the population is White British with a smaller percentage of families from minority ethnic groups. Within the area there is also a large military base at Swanton Morley. The skills of children when they start early years provision are typically below what is expected for their age. There are small rural villages surrounding Litcham Children's Centre, with areas considered to be more affluent as well as areas of deprivation.

### What does the group need to do to improve further?

- The local authority should rapidly put in place a protocol for information sharing between children's social services and the group to improve the quality of early intervention.
- Implement a systematic approach to evaluating the quality and impact of services.
- Make sure adults and children are fully involved in shaping services.
- Work with schools and early years providers in the reach area to improve the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile scores and school readiness for all children.
- Improve assessments, planning and record-keeping for targeted intervention with vulnerable children and families by ensuring:
  - there is an adequate focus on children's wellbeing and progress
  - in more complex cases chronologies are used effectively to inform planning
  - staff supervision is used to identify and address any shortcomings in record keeping
  - the involvement of fathers and/or male carers in supporting their children's progress where appropriate.

## Inspection judgements

### Access to services by young children and families **Good**

- The group has significantly increased the number of children and families they are working with since April 2013 by consulting more widely and increasing outreach work. As a result centre staff are working with the large majority of targeted groups including young parents, families of children with disabilities, families living in the most deprived areas and an increasing number of fathers and other male carers. The group recognises that outreach work remains a priority in order to maintain this level of contact and to reach and engage those who are not yet accessing services.
- Parents and families who come through the door and those who receive outreach and family support visits are positive about the work of the group. These parents are kept up to date with the different activities that are on offer through a variety of methods, including word-of-mouth, leaflets and display boards in various locations. They express high levels of satisfaction with the programmes offered.
- The uptake of free entitlement to early education for three and four year olds is good. The centres have been proactive in contacting those families who are eligible for two year old funding and as a result the numbers accessing this is very high.
- The centres have been proactive in developing some strong partnerships at a local level, for example, with local support groups, the army barracks and health services. Consequently an increasing number of families in most need are receiving good support including families of children with disabilities through the 'Little Stars' group.
- Health visitors who work with the centres say that although mothers are initiating breastfeeding, they are not receiving the support they need to continue. As a result, the proportion sustaining breastfeeding in the reach area is low. The group has recently resumed the breastfeeding café at the Dereham centre. Mothers told inspectors that this is helping them to continue with breastfeeding. Managers recognise that reducing child obesity is a priority and have begun to address this issue, for example through the 'Baby weigh and play' sessions.

### The quality of practice and services **Requires improvement**

- The range of activities and services provided at the centre are appropriate and increasingly becoming better matched to the needs of users as the group extends its understanding of its priority families.
- Data shows that not enough children reach age-related expectations when starting school. The number of children achieving 78 points or more at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage are below the national average especially in the Dereham south area where the score dipped significantly in 2012. Results in the Litcham area are better but are below the national average. The centre has been proactive in meeting with schools to review how they can work together to improve outcomes for children.
- In most cases, staff provide effective one-to-one support for families. They gain parents' trust through parenting courses and specific activities in the home. This has resulted in families gaining confidence to attend centre activities, improve their children's behaviour, and for some children, being removed from child protection plans.
- The quality and impact of targeted intervention to help vulnerable children and their families is inconsistent. Declining use of early help assessments, chronologies and gaps in records mean that some children do not benefit from well-coordinated, effective support. Plans and records are largely focused on adults with insufficient detail on the outcomes

required for the child. As a result, help provided for some families lacks a clear focus and, where this is the case, it has limited impact on children's wellbeing and development.

- The monthly 'Baby Weigh and Play' drop-in sessions are well attended and is one example of how the centre seeks to monitor the weight of young children alongside promoting the value of a healthy diet. Families using the group's services feel they are helped to give their children a healthy and safe start in life through parenting courses and learning important skills such as paediatric first aid.
- Although the centres promote purposeful learning experiences through a range of activities such as 'Messy play' the sessions observed during the inspection were of a variable quality. In the best examples, staff were good role models, encouraging parents to play with their children and the evaluation of the session was strong. In contrast, some staff were distracted by taking photographs and missed opportunities to talk with families and planning and evaluation was poor. Sessions for children are not always linked to the development of local priorities, such as developing children's speech and language.
- Parents attend a range of courses, such as first aid and parenting programmes. Parents enjoy their learning, gain confidence and increase their parenting skills. However, leaders recognise that more adults need to access literacy, numeracy and information technology courses. Plans are in place for computers and more adult learning courses to be made available at the Dereham centre in the new year.

### **The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management**

### **Requires improvement**

- Lines of accountability are clear and understood. The local authority officer carries out robust annual conversations and quarterly monitoring visits based on areas of the service specification. This conversation results in specific, agreed targets being set. So far, these targets have effectively driven up the number of registered families and the proportion of target groups in contact with the group. However, the local authority has not established effective joint working between the children's centre and children's social care. As a result the effectiveness of some work to improve parenting in families of vulnerable children has been limited. This is due to inconsistencies in information sharing and joint working with social workers.
- Leaders are aware that the impact of the centres' work is not clear. Following a period of change, new systems are beginning to be put in place to monitor the effectiveness of what the group offers and more precisely measure the impact of services for children and families.
- Performance management and professional supervision are established for all staff in the group but it is not as effective as it should be because there is variable practice in the completion of case files and some services offered. Staff have good access to further training and professional development opportunities.
- There are some examples of parents' views shaping service delivery and design and the parents' forum is becoming established. The move to a single advisory board is underway. Although an appropriate membership of key partners has been identified, attendance at the few meetings that have been held so far has been low.
- The senior management team has good plans for improvement and has taken effective action to develop the group since Action for Children took over the management one year ago. They have quite rightly concentrated on raising the profile and quality of services delivered at the Dereham Central Centre which was operating at a much lower level than the Litcham centre. It is too soon to see the impact of the numerous new initiatives that

have been put in place but the early indications are that many more families are aware of the centre and are using it.

- Agencies and professionals working in the area told inspectors that they have regained confidence in the ability of the Dereham Centre to provide services. They are keen to improve their working relationship with the centre.
- Staff in Dereham are successfully increasing the numbers of families registering and engaging with the group, from a very low starting point. Staff and health partners collaborate well. The recently formed Young Parents group and services for children with disabilities has increased the number of priority families registering with the group.
- Resources, including staff deployment, are used appropriately to meet the needs of children and families. The centres work well with some key partners and support a few new initiatives in the wider community. The provision of crèche places and in some circumstances funding for transport costs is supporting those in most need of access to services.
- Safeguarding arrangements are supported by robust policies, procedures and practices, including for the recruitment and induction. Staff have a good knowledge of procedures to keep children and families safe, and undertake regular training.

## 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/Children's Centre Group details**

<b>Unique reference number</b>	80098
<b>Local authority</b>	Norfolk
<b>Inspection number</b>	433186
<b>Managed by</b>	Action for children on behalf of the local authority

<b>Approximate number of children under five in the reach area</b>	2,411
<b>Centre leader</b>	Helen Millward
<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	Not previously inspected
<b>Telephone number</b>	01362 692839
<b>Email address</b>	Helen.Millward@actionforchildren.org.uk

**This group consists of the following children's centres:**

- 20947 Dereham Central Children's Centre
- 20948 Dereham South Children's Centre
- 21801 Litcham Children's Centre



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