

St Helens - South East Area Children's Centre Group

c/o Thatto Heath Children's Centre, 30 Brisbane Street, Thatto Heath St Helens WA9 5QT

Inspection date

26–27 November 2013

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. It is not good because:

- Centre leaders do not have clear instructions about how to capture data in relation to who is using the centre for which services. Only the minority of families are participating in services.
- Services which everybody can attend have been reduced, due in part to local authority financial cuts and some staffing issues. In addition, it is not clear if the increased role staff play in delivering targeted support to more vulnerable families is hindering access by other families.
- The availability and use of local data and information is not good enough. Too many partners do not share pertinent information with the centre group preventing them from knowing the difference services make to improving health, education and life chances.
- Where data is available, it is not used rigorously by leaders and managers to influence development plans and targets, monitor the performance of the centre or drive improvements in services. Nor is it used to identify families or target groups who are less likely to use services, assess needs or interrogate why families fail to sustain their links with the centres.
- The centres' are unable to demonstrate how services and activities are helping children to improve their basic skills and abilities to be ready for transition to school. Furthermore, adult learning opportunities are poorly promoted, preventing more adults knowing what is available.
- Breastfeeding rates are too low and this is not prioritised within improvement plans. In addition, the lack of localised health data prevents the centre group from setting health specific targets.

This children's centre group has the following strengths:

- Teen and young parents to be are successfully engaged with centre services helping young families to access care, guidance and support pertinent to their needs.
- The centres' role in the local authority's early help and intervention strategy is well developed and identifies families experiencing significant troubles and crisis. As a result, intensive and targeted support helps them to move forward in their lives.
- The centres' recruit a good number of volunteers and provide them with good opportunities for supporting and delivering various groups and administrative duties.

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 Thatto Heath Children's Centre and Four Way's Children's Centre.

This inspection was carried out by two of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an additional inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with senior leaders in the local authority, centre leaders, partner agencies, parents, children's centre workers, health and education professionals and representatives from the advisory board.

The inspectors visited services operating from Thatto Heath and Four Ways Children's Centres. They observed the centres' work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Inspection team

Gillian Bishop	Her Majesty's Inspector, Lead Inspector
Ali Mekki	Her Majesty's Inspector
Ken Fisher	Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about the centre group

St Helen's South East Area Group is a group of children's centres located in St Helen's and run directly by the local authority. The group is made up of two centres: Thatto Heath Children's Centre and Four Ways Children's Centre, both originally phase one centres. The group was established in 2011 following a local authority review. The children's centre assistant area manager oversees the centres in the group and is supported by a local authority early intervention service manager. The children's centre group has one advisory board, which includes representation from a range of key partners and parents. The centres' work with two early intervention teams who support the South East and West areas of St Helen's. The South East early intervention team are based at Four Ways Children's Centre.

Thatto Heath Children's Centre serves families living in Thatto Heath Portico, West Park, Toll Bar, Ravenhead, Sutton Heath, Nutgrove, Grange Park, Eccleston and Rainhill. There is a travellers' site, family homeless shelter and a temporary housing project for young teenagers located with the reach area. Four Ways Children's Centre serves families living in Fouracre, Sutton Manor, Sutton Leach and Clockface. The centre shares a site with the local health centre and includes onsite childcare which is led and managed by the local authority. Registered early years providers are subject to separate inspection arrangements. Reports can be found at <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk>.

There are 2,700 children under five living in the area covered by the centres'. The community is economically diverse and includes areas of higher deprivation as well as more affluent areas. This diversity is reflected in the percentage of children living in households dependant on workless benefits which in the Four Ways area is 43% and 22% in the Thatto Heath area. Families residing in the area are predominately White British. Less than 5% of families are from minority ethnic groups which include an increasing number of East European families and families who move in and out of the area and who reside on the local traveller site. Children's skills and abilities are much lower than expected on entry to school particularly in their communication and language and personal, social and emotional development.

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

- Work with the local authority to improve access to services by young children and families by:
 - improving the usefulness of demographic data to enable leaders to monitor, understand and inform engagement trends across the whole reach area
 - using this data rigorously to support the identification of families and particular target groups who are harder to reach or less likely to engage with centre services
 - undertaking a rigorous analysis of need across the whole community
 - ensuring the centres' provide an appropriate balance between universal, targeted and outreach provision that successfully engages more families in activities suited to their needs.
- Work with the local authority to improve the quality and impact of practice and services by:
 - developing strategies to systematically promote pathways to training, qualifications and/or employment
 - working with adult learning partners much more effectively to track and evaluate retention and progression rates to demonstrate impact on worklessness and life chances
 - devising systems to track the progress of children in the Early Years Foundation Stage to systematically demonstrate the impact of the centres' early childhood services on narrowing the achievement gap and ensuring children's readiness for school.
- Work with the local authority and the advisory board to improve the effectiveness of leadership, governance and management by:
 - devising a strategic locality plan which provides clarity about how engagement data will be captured, monitored and used to inform the on-going development of services
 - significantly improving the collation, interrogation and analysis of data to assess community needs much more effectively
 - significantly improving performance management procedures, in particular, annual conversation arrangements, to routinely and rigorously assess the quality, impact and success of services and hold the centre firmly to account for its progress
 - devising service and partnership agreements with key partners to ensure information protocols support the work of the centre group
 - improving the centres' business plan so that all key priorities are grounded in measurable success criteria, differentiated to reflect different community needs and include well informed targets to measure progress more meticulously
 - improving access to localised health data to enable centre leaders to assess health trends more effectively and set specific health targets within their business plan, particularly in relation to breast feeding.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Inadequate

- The majority (63%) of children under five years are registered with the centres, however, their active participation in services after registration drops significantly. Therefore, too many families do not have access to information, advice and guidance about early childhood services available to them.
- Only the minority of each particular target group, such as lone parents and children from black and minority ethnic groups, are engaged with services and in some cases this is lower with only 8% of father's participating.
- Centre leaders do not receive or seek precise enough information about families in the area to help them understand where services need to be placed and for whom. For example, they do not know the number of East European or traveller families in the area so they do not know how many they have yet to reach. This prevents the centre group being fully inclusive.
- The lack of clarity about how and when participation is captured or recorded hinders the accuracy of the data. In addition, the lack of sustained engagement with families is not interrogated by leaders which mean families who quickly lose contact with the centre are not contacted to engage them again.
- The participation of teen and young parents is strong as they access their own Tots and Teen group and participate in specific activities such as the Craft Training Course as a taster to further education. This helps to retain their involvement with centre staff and services. In addition, MATCH (Men and Their Children Group) provides similar provision although attendances are more variable.
- The take up of two-year-old education funding in the Thatto Heath area is good at 86% due to the effective work between health visitors and centre staff to identify children who would benefit. However, the take up of places is very inconsistent and far lower in other parts of the community.
- The centres' do not receive or ask for information about the take up of three and four-year-old nursery education funding. Consequently, they have no idea if every child is accessing their free nursery entitlement. This hinders their responsibility to support children's readiness for school.

The quality of practice and services

Inadequate

- The centres' are unable to demonstrate the impact they have on improving educational achievements for children in their early years who access their services and activities. Despite a focus on improving children's speech, language and personal skills the centres' do not systematically plan, track or assess children's progress. As a result, they are unable to demonstrate that children they see are better prepared for school, in comparison to the ones who do not attend. This prevents the centre group fully meeting its main obligations and is in contrast to systems in place for private, voluntary and independent early years provision in the wider community.
- The promotion of adult education and training provision is inadequate because insufficient importance is given to raising the profile of adult education and training within both centres. Furthermore, the centres' do not seek information about adult enrolments and achievements with adult learning providers. The lack of encouragement given to parents to improve English, mathematics and information and communication technology (ICT) hinders parents' ability to support their children's learning at home, as well as improve their chances of securing work.
- Some activities and support to develop employability skills are progressing much better. The volunteer programme is managed effectively with 39 volunteers being recruited over two years of which 40% have found employment.
- Parents, carers and children attending PEEPS (Parental Early Education Programmes), Small Talk and Fun 2 Be Active all thoroughly enjoy these play sessions.

- The quality of assessment, case files and support for individual children and their families identified as being more vulnerable and needing one-to-one support is good. This work is well planned and carefully supervised ensuring positive results for children who are looked after by people other than their parents or being supported through child protection plans.
- The centre group have not assessed the needs in the wider community so they do not know if staff roles or services need to change to better support more families to use the centres.
- Parenting courses, such as Triple P and Stepping Stones for parents with children with disabilities, are well attended and successful in improving parenting skills and behaviour management strategies. As a result, some parents state their relationships with their children 'are ten times better'.
- Families engaging in health related activities and services, such as Fun 2 Be Active, Weaning Parties and access to Shoots food Co-op and Green Base, benefit from good advice about how to lead active and healthy lives. However, the centres' do not track the long term impact of these services or those they signpost to, such as smoking cessation. Therefore, they do not know the impact of these activities on family's lives.
- The number of new mother's breastfeeding at six to eight weeks is too low at 27% and the necessity to improve this or other health inequalities are not a priority within improvement plans because the centres' do not set any health specific targets.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

Inadequate

- The leadership, governance and management of the centre are weak, due in part to a lengthy and on-going local authority review of services. This has prevented a more determined approach to securing improvement and reducing inequalities.
- Procedures to manage performance and routinely assess the work of the centre have not been rigorous or routine. For example, the centre group have not received a local authority annual conversation since 2011 and leaders do not routinely monitor and assess the quality and impact of services and activities thoroughly enough to ensure services are making a difference for children and their families.
- The use and availability of meaningful data prevents the centre group from ensuring services are rigorously matched to local needs.
- The business plan lacks rigour and does not reflect the priorities and needs of the whole community.
- A wide range of partner agencies are represented on the newly merged advisory board providing opportunities for partnership working with local schools, health and housing. Parents are also well represented, including one whom acts as chair to the board and who provides a strong voice for the community. However, the board is not well informed about the centres' progress due to poor data information, the lack of performance measures within development plans and the inconsistent understanding by some partners of their contribution the centres' work.
- Some relationships with partner agencies such as those with Helena Housing, Connexions and the local authority early intervention team are strong, resulting in some well coordinated support for families. However, the quality of partnerships with local schools is variable preventing stronger transitional arrangements for children and the sharing of good early years practice.
- Families who access services are kept safe and well protected. The centres' role in the local authority's early help, intervention and prevention strategy is well developed ensuring families experiencing troubles and crisis, receive intensive and targeted support. The good use of the Common Assessment Framework helps to tailor multi-agency support that enables families to move forward in their lives.
- Appropriate child protection and safeguarding procedures are in place which meet statutory requirements. However, the local authority's policy for reviewing employees' suitability to work with children is not consistent with best practice.

- Opportunities for parents to share their views and influence service delivery are highly valued by staff and leaders. Views are shared during the Family Matters group and taken to the advisory board for consultation, helping parents to understand how they can influence service development. In addition, parents and especially grandparents, are keen supporters, volunteers and effective fundraisers for the centre group.
- The centre group is well resourced although space and services are often underutilised due to low participation by families and a further reduction of normal services during school holidays. In addition, there is a lack of clarity about how staff time is used and deployed.
- Staff and leaders have experienced much change and disruption over the last few years but they remain positive about the future and they have a clear understanding of the work still to do to secure the improvements required.

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	80698
Local authority	St. Helens
Inspection number	433367
Managed by	The local authority

Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	2700
Centre leader	Fiona Banner
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Telephone number	01744 678373
Email address	fiona.banner@sthelens.gov.uk

This group consists of the following children's centres:

- URN 21208 Four Ways Children's Centre
- URN 23141 Thatto Heath Children's Centre

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