

Staffordshire - Stafford

C/O Stafford Children's Centre, Faraday Road, Staffordshire, ST16 3NQ

Inspection dates	10–12 June 2014
Previous inspection date	Not previously inspected

Overall effectiveness	This inspection: Previous inspection:	Requires improvement	3
		Not applicable	
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 group of centres requires improvement: It is not good because:

- Only the majority of families are registered with the children's centres. Not enough families, including priority families, are attending some of the children's centre sessions.
- Data provided by the local authority are not all up-to-date. Systems are not assisting managers, and management advisory board members to easily monitor the group's performance and quickly drive improvement.
- Not all services are tracking children's and adults' progress effectively, which means that the centres cannot clearly show that they are having a positive impact on families' lives across all services.
- Appropriate priorities for the centres are in place, but precise local authority targets are not clearly set out within one overall development plan for the district.
- Not enough parents are contributing to the design and delivery of the group's services. The centres' efforts to set up parent forums and encourage parent representatives to attend locality partnership and management advisory boards have not been fully effective.

It has the following strengths:

- The group is now receiving data regarding new births in the local area.
- Most eligible families with two-year-olds are taking up the offer of a free place in early years settings that provide good or outstanding early education. Support for early years settings that are not yet good is well-targeted.
- Good quality family support work is effective, improving parenting skills and ensuring parents and children develop positive support networks. Support for young parents is having a positive impact on their families' lives.
- Despite significant reductions in resources, management and staff remain positive and committed to improving the lives of families, across the district they serve.

What does the group need to do to improve further?

- Ensure a large majority of families, including those from the most deprived parts of the district, are accessing services by:
 - working with partners to further increase the delivery and take-up of services in the targeted communities that need them most
 - using the recently available new birth data effectively to target those families most in need of services
 - using and presenting data effectively to clearly demonstrate the engagement of priority groups and capture the full extent of the centres' work.

- Improve systems to measure the impact of the group by:
 - tracking progress and outcomes for individual children and adult learners
 - collating the information that is gathered so that the group has a sharper overview of the impact of all services delivered.

- Improve governance by:
 - ensuring the management advisory board has the data and information needed to provide effective challenge and drive improvement
 - ensuring the voice of the families using the centres is informing service development and delivery.

- Bring together the priorities and performance measures that have been set for the district into a comprehensive development plan that includes precise targets for improvement.

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.

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

The inspectors held meetings with strategic leads for commissioning and targeted services and district leads for commissioning and targeted services and the business manager. Inspectors also met with health and education professionals, commissioned providers, family support workers, parents and grandparents, volunteers and the chair and members of the management advisory board for the district.

The inspectors visited Stafford, Castlechurch, Silkmere, Manor Hill, Wildwood, Barlaston and Hixon children's centres, as well as the Signpost Centre in Highfields and the Holmcroft Community centre.

The inspection covered the following centres: Stafford, Castlechurch, Manor Hill and Silkmere Children's Centres.

They observed the centres' work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Inspection team

Penny Fisher, Lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Cliff Rose

Her Majesty's Inspector

Lesley Talbot-Strettle

Additional Inspector

Joan Cawdron

Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about the group

The Stafford Group comprises four children's centre clusters in Staffordshire. The group was established in April 2013 and serves the Stafford, Stone, Barlaston, Hixon and Gnosall areas. Group leadership and management are provided by Staffordshire County Council and governance by the management advisory board for the Stafford district and four cluster locality partnership boards. The daily management of the group is overseen by the local authority district lead for targeted services and local authority district children's commissioner.

Stafford, Castlechurch and Silkmore Children's Centres are all situated in Stafford itself, with Manor Hill children's centre situated in Stone. Stafford is a full-time centre and is the main hub centre in the district; other centres are open part-time. Linked satellite centres include Hixon, Barlaston and Wildwood. Early childhood services and activities are delivered through the children's centres and other community venues. The KEVI centre (Gnosall), previously a satellite of Castlechurch children's centre has closed as a new academy is being developed on the previous school site.

The group provides a full range of services, including health, adult learning, early education and family support. Services are delivered by the local authority 'Families First' targeted and specialist services, commissioned services and partnerships with agencies, community groups and independent providers.

The four main children's centres in the Stafford Group are on school sites. These include Castlechurch Primary School, Manor Hill First School, Silkmore Community Primary School and John Wheeldon Primary School. There is linked early years provision at Sandytots, which is based in the Stafford Children's Centre, The Launch Pad at the Silkmore Community Primary School site and Hixon Pre-school Playgroup, which is at the Hixon Children's Centre. Separate inspection reports for all of these schools and early years providers can be found at www.ofsted.gov.uk.

There are approximately 6,600 children under five years of age in the district. The very large majority are White British. The economic position of families across the district is very mixed. The centres serve a relatively affluent area overall, with pockets of deprivation in the Stafford, Silkmore and Castlechurch Children's Centres' areas. About 900 children aged under five live in some of the 30% most deprived wards in the country. The number of workless families is low in comparison to West Midlands, England and Staffordshire averages. Children's level of skill and knowledge when they enter early years provision vary across the district.

The centres' key target group is those families living in the areas of high deprivation within the district. Other target groups also include families affected by domestic violence, families affected by obesity, young parents and children with special educational needs and their parents.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Requires improvement

- Only the majority of families in the district are registered with the children's centres, although most engage with universal services for children under the age of five. The centres are finding resourceful new ways of engaging with families, such as increased use of parent-led 'Stay and play' groups. Health clinics held in some centres are well-attended, including by expectant parents, and promote other children's centre services.
- Various local authority data systems do not ensure that all available information is brought together to clearly show the extent of the centres' work with priority families. For example, separate data systems are in place for level three family support work and children's centre services, despite being one integrated service for the district. In the current format, data is not effective in demonstrating good engagement for those families from the more deprived areas of the district.
- Since April 2013, parents have been paying a small charge to attend commissioned services such as 'Play and learning' sessions. This has led to an overall reduction in the number of families engaging with the group's services, but some sessions are popular and show an increase in attendances over the last year. An increasing number of families are taking up the offer of a 'pass card', which ensures that cost is not a barrier for those families that need services the most.
- The take up of funded places for vulnerable two-year-olds is high; most children have access to good or outstanding early education provision in the district. The availability of discretionary places ensures that those that do not meet the criteria, but have an identified additional need for support, are able to access appropriate provision. Partners work well together to identify and support children with special educational needs and disabilities in accessing appropriate services.
- To overcome barriers to access for some priority families more services are being delivered in venues that are established hubs of their communities. This is ensuring sustained engagement with some priority families, such as pregnant teenagers and young parents who might not otherwise take up services.
- Multi-agency panels, attended by an appropriate range of partners are ensuring that families have access to services, including specialist support through Child and Adult Mental Health services that are appropriately matched to their needs.

The quality of practice and services

Requires improvement

- Commissioned 'Play and learning' sessions are well planned and include a good range of activities, with highly effective modelling of good practice by practitioners. Families that attend participate fully but sometimes numbers attending, including families from less affluent parts of the district, are low. Although an above average proportion of children in the district achieve well in the Early Years Foundation Stage, the gap between children from poorer backgrounds and their better-off peers remains too wide.
- Family support work is effective and well-recorded. Services are able to demonstrate the impact of their work, such as improving parents' knowledge and understanding of parenting skills. Parents report that they are managing children's behaviour more

positively and have an increased understanding of the importance of their interactions with their children following staff support. Good support networks for both parents and children are well developed.

- Assessments, including the Common Assessment Framework and other early help assessment tools, are identifying family needs effectively. Good partnerships are in place to support families affected by domestic violence. Parents report that they have noted significant improvements in their lives following engagement with the centres' services, such as, reducing levels of isolation and depression.
- Young parents are provided with good quality holistic support. Tenacious work to maintain contact with these parents is undertaken and there are some individual examples of good outcomes and a reduction in in-equality, which include young parents accessing education, employment and training opportunities.
- Children attending commissioned 'Play and learning' sessions make good progress, which is recorded and shared with parents. However, the centres have only recently introduced longer term tracking and this is being piloted with one primary school in the district. This means that the centres are currently not able to demonstrate whether services have made a positive difference to children's readiness for school and achievements.
- Families have access to a wide range of learning opportunities in a variety of settings to improve their social, personal and employability skills. Most learners, who attend courses, achieve their main learning outcomes and improve their life chances. However, the recorded numbers attending are low and tracking is insufficiently robust to accurately reflect the impact of the services on skills and progression.
- There are a growing number of volunteers working across services, which means that the children's centres are able to offer more activities and services. For example, volunteers play a pivotal role in the running of a parent-led twins' group, the young parents' group and the toy library. Volunteers are vetted, well-supported and access a range of training, which supports their pathway into employment.
- Health outcomes are generally better than found across Staffordshire as a whole and some are improving. The number of teenage parents has fallen and there has been a reduction in obesity rates in young children in the district. Activities such as the healthy walks, 'cook and eat' sessions and a community café at the Silkmore centre contribute to healthy lifestyles. However, support for mothers to sustain breastfeeding is patchy across the area and rates are comparatively low in some parts of the district.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

Requires improvement

- Governance arrangements are clearly defined and understood. However, the lack of easily accessible data is not helping members of the management advisory board or locality partnership boards to provide sufficient challenge to the centres and drive the required improvement, especially the engagement of priority families. The sharing of new birth data is a welcome recent development, demonstrating good capacity for further improvement.
- Leaders and managers demonstrate a good knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of the centres and appropriate priorities have been agreed based on accurate analysis of needs and local knowledge. Actions and targets for improvement are contained within

various plans. However, there is not an overarching, clear development plan, containing precise performance measures for the Stafford Group. This means that the group cannot easily identify the progress being made.

- The commissioning framework is clear. Relevant services have been carefully commissioned based on the needs of the area. Quarterly monitoring is routinely taking place and commissioned providers are regularly evaluating services. Commissioning arrangements are frequently reviewed to ensure effectiveness, but these discussions are not always well documented.
- Safeguarding policies and procedures are sound. Supervision is undertaken regularly and staff feel well supported. The commissioning process ensures that the safeguarding policies and procedures of organisations providing commissioned services are robust. Close working relations with the local family support teams and the co-located safeguarding support unit ensure a collaborative approach to protecting the district's most vulnerable children, including looked after children, children in need and those subject to a child protection plan.
- The district lead has been in post since April 2013 and has learned an impressive amount about the role and the district over that time, successfully developing good working partnerships. For example the district lead is chairing the local 'Start Well' health group in order to ensure that community health services are delivered in a coherent and consistent way across the district.
- Parents are asked for their views and regularly evaluate services they have attended. However, despite efforts to encourage regular parent's forums and to attend locality partnership board meetings that are held in the four cluster areas, only small numbers of parents are currently taking up these opportunities. There is currently no parent representative on the management advisory board.
- Centres are attractive and welcoming but some sessions are not engaging enough priority families. Following significant funding reductions the centres have worked hard to make best use of resources. This is evident in the delivery of increasingly well-targeted services within the community and the on-going work, in conjunction with partners, to meet both the apparent and hidden needs of the district.

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.

Group details

Unique reference number	80624
Local authority	Staffordshire
Inspection number	450690
Managed by	The local authority
Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	6,497
Centre leader	Julie Walker
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Telephone number	01785 854704
Email address	julie.walker@staffordshire.gov.uk

This group consists of the following children's centres:

- 22899: Stafford Children's Centre
- 20586: Castlechurch Children's Centre
- 21911: Manor Hill Children's Centre
- 22723: Silkmore Children's Centre

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