

Staffordshire – Lichfield District Group

c/o Charnwood Children's Centre, Purcell Avenue, Lichfield, Staffordshire, WS13 7PH

Inspection date

13–14 May 2014

Overall effectiveness	This inspection: Previous inspection:	Requires improvement	3
		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:

- Insufficient numbers of children and families use the group's services regularly, and not enough is being done to find out why numbers attending some activities are so low.
- Not all providers make effective checks on the impact of the services they deliver, and leaders are not following up on this with sufficient vigour. Leaders and managers do not fully track the progress that children and adults make.
- The absence of reliable information on some priority groups, particularly young parents and families on low incomes or those who are out of work, inhibits the ability of leaders to plan ahead.
- Although priorities are identified, the lack of clear deadlines, and precise and measurable targets impede leaders' effectiveness in monitoring the group's performance and driving improvement at a good pace. Performance management of staff has stalled whilst new arrangements are brought in.
- The district advisory board and partnership boards are insufficiently challenging, and not enough is being done to ensure that parents' views are effectively taken into account in decision-making.

This children's centre group has the following strengths:

- Strong partnerships underpin the good quality, carefully commissioned services, and set out the standard of delivery expected and the outcomes anticipated.
- Safeguarding policy, practice and procedures are effective in protecting children and families.
- Regular meetings and effective communication between a range of agencies mean that children and families at risk are known and have their needs responded to quickly and well. Case files are maintained to a good standard.
- Effective work takes place to help children get ready for school. The take up of free education places by eligible two year-olds is good. Outcomes at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage across the reach area are above the national average.

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 Charnwood Children's Centre and Springhill Children's Centre.

This inspection was carried out by three Additional Inspectors.

The inspectors held meetings with: the district leads for commissioning and targeted services; the strategic leads for commissioning and targeted services, local authority officers; health and education professionals; partner agencies; commissioned providers, family support workers; and representatives from the district advisory board. They also spoke with parents, carers and grandparents.

The inspectors visited both children's centres as well as satellite centres in the group and observed a range of activities. The district leads for targeted services and commissioning attended all team meetings.

The inspectors observed the centre group's work, and looked at a wide range of relevant documentation.

Inspection team

Christine Field, Lead inspector	Additional inspector
Karen Cooper	Additional inspector
Ann Taylor	Additional inspector

Full report

Information about the centre group

The Lichfield District Group comprises two children's centre clusters in Staffordshire: Charnwood and Springhill. The centres were established as a group in April 2013. Services and activities across the two centres and in venues out in the community are delivered directly by the local authority 'Families First' targeted and specialist services, commissioned services, and services delivered in partnership by private providers, community groups and partner agencies. The centre meets the core purpose.

Charnwood Children's Centre is the main hub within the Lichfield cluster and is located on the Charnwood Learning Campus. This campus also includes Charnwood Primary School, Rocklands Special School and Pre-school, and the Lichfield Dyslexia Centre, all of which are subject to separate inspection arrangements. The reports can be found at www.ofsted.gov.uk. Charnwood Children's Centre, which was designated in 2008, links with two satellite centres: Willows and Saxon Hill. Springhill Children's Centre is the main hub within the Burntwood cluster and is co-located with Springhill Primary School. The centre, which was also designated in 2008, links with Boney Hay satellite centre.

A district advisory board with two partnership boards, one for each cluster in the group, have very recently been set up to support leadership, management and governance. Day-to-day management of the group is overseen by the local authority district targeted services manager and local authority district children's commissioner.

There are 4,354 children under the age of five years living in the group's reach area, of which approximately 16% are from low income homes or those where no-one is in work. The communities in the north of the reach area tend to have higher levels of disadvantage than those in the south. For example, one in five children living close to Springhill Children's Centre is from a benefit dependant household. There is a high percentage of lone parent families living in the area, many of whom are out of work. Over 95% of families living in the area served by the group are White British. The levels of skills and knowledge of children when they enter early years provision vary across the area but overall are below that expected for their age.

Priority groups are defined as: young parents, children in need, children from low income and workless families, and two year-old children eligible for free education.

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

- Increase the number of children and families who access the group's services, particularly the number of young parents and families with young children who are out of work or on low incomes, so that at least the large majority can be helped to improve their lives.
- Improve the impact that services have by making sure that:
 - work is undertaken to find out why the numbers attending some sessions are so low
 - monitoring and quality assurance activities focus on the progress being made by children towards agreed developmental milestones
 - information from learning and skills partners is routinely provided about the retention and successes of any adults signposted to courses
 - tracking systems are devised that help leaders see clearly which services are leading to the best outcomes for families, particularly those from priority groups.
- Improve leadership, management and governance by:
 - working with the local authority and partners to ensure that reliable and useful data are available in good time to support self-evaluation and performance checks
 - setting clear targets, timelines and measures of success
 - implementing robust performance management of staff
 - strengthening governance by injecting challenge into the district and partnership boards' decision-making and getting parents involved.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Requires improvement

- Some universal services were transferred to commissioned providers and community-led groups during 2013, who have experienced challenges in keeping the engagement of families. As a result some have seen a drop of 5 -7% in the registration rate and engagement in service. At 35% overall the take up of services is too low and no specific strategy has yet been developed to enable the consistent follow up of non-attendance.
- Data show that just under a quarter of one of the key priority groups - workless and low income families - use the centres' services regularly. No data are made available to the centre group about the engagement of young parents, some of whom do attend the 'Play and Stay' group set up to support their specific needs.
- Over 80% of eligible two year-olds take up their free education place, but a fifth of these children are attending less than good quality settings. The local authority is actively supporting the improvement of early years' settings and there should be sufficient places for the anticipated increase in numbers in going forward.
- Clinics for expectant mothers, new parents and checks on children's health and well-being are now being run from the hub centres and some link venues. This is drawing in families who might otherwise be reluctant to visit the centres. Close working partnerships result in the group's services being well promoted by partners, although it is too soon to see what impact this is having on registrations and reach.
- A free pass card scheme is being introduced; this enables the most vulnerable families to access services free of charge. So far the signs are that it is helping to reduce inequalities.

The quality of practice and services

Requires improvement

- The quality of services provided by the group is generally good but the numbers of children and families benefiting from them are too low. The expectation set out in contracts, that at least a quarter of priority families are enabled to use services open to everyone, is not consistently met.
- A thorough analysis of needs is undertaken and this is used to commission a wide range of services that are held in venues located across the group's reach area. Leaders meet quarterly with the providers of these services to check on quality, but there is only limited focus on checking what impact the services have on improving the outcomes for children and families and reducing inequalities.
- Activities such as toddler groups and 'Play and Stay' sessions are planned according to good early year's practice and are well-resourced. Some activities, such as 'Small Talk' and 'Early Words Together', focus very specifically on promoting children's communication and language development, and tracking shows that good progress is being made. For other groups there is no tracking, and elsewhere the checks made on children's learning and development are not sharp enough.
- Adults are signposted to the courses available to support their education and skills development, but leaders do not know enough about success rates or pathways to employment for adults, including those who are out of work. A club run by a local housing association for young parent tenants supports their career development, and the Citizen's Advice Bureau gives weekly 'drop-in' advice about debts and benefits. However the outcomes from these are not shared with the district group.
- Health outcomes are moving in the right direction; childhood obesity is reducing, and breastfeeding is increasing at initiation but not at the targeted six-to-eight week stage. This is particularly the case at Burntwood. Outcomes at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage are higher than seen nationally, but children eligible for free school meals achieve less well than their peers.
- Family support work is augmented by 31 'Homestart' volunteers who visit children and families in their homes. Feedback from families is very positive and case files show clearly the high impact that collaborative early intervention is having on building confidence, reducing isolation and enhancing parenting skills. Data show that 50% of 'troubled families' case files have been successfully closed since the start of the 'Building Resilient Families and Communities' initiative.
- Family learning opportunities include 'Understanding your child's behaviour', 'Cook and eat' and first aid. These help the parents who attend to enhance their relationships and extend their knowledge about child health, physical well-being and safety.
- Very strong partnerships with specialist agencies and schools underpin highly effective work to support children with special needs and ensure their inclusion. An outstanding session was observed in which children and parents had fun and enjoyed learning together in the hydro pool as they developed muscle control and practised breathing techniques, whilst 'putting the fire out'.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

Requires improvement

- Leaders have kept staff morale upbeat during a period of on-going organisational change and financial savings but the pace of positive change has been too slow. The main improvement priorities were identified at the annual conversation meeting with the local authority in February. However, these are not being pursued with sufficient drive, and the absence of specific targets and timelines hinders leaders' ability to improve the group's effectiveness.

- The centres have access to a variety of data, but these are in different formats and from different sources, and reliability of the data is not always assured. For example, health data are from 2012 and some data, such as live birth information and the registration and reach of some priority groups, are simply not there. Nevertheless, leaders are not making the best use of the available data to show how effectively they are making a difference to the lives of priority groups.
- There is good representation of partners on the district advisory board. However, this does not include parents and too little is being done to get them involved. The board has been supportive in the past but has yet to agree its terms of reference or to fulfil its performance monitoring and challenge roles. A similar situation exists with the partnership boards. These have also met once under the new arrangements to agree their aims and purpose and begin to look at what is working well and what needs improvement.
- Safeguarding policy, practice and procedures are effective in protecting children and families. There are crystal clear referral routes for families in need of support, and the draft Staffordshire Common Assessment Framework procedures are being implemented well.
- Professionals from many different agencies meet regularly to share information and work effectively together to ensure children's and families' needs are met quickly and well. This groups knows all children that are subject to a child protection plan, in need or looked after close links with the safeguarding and social care teams ensure a strong safety net of support for those most at risk.
- Supervision is undertaken regularly, is supportive and links well to professional development training. Performance management has stalled whilst new arrangements are brought in.
- Parents' views are regularly sought after sessions and courses, and have led to changes, such as to the start and finish time. Parents have initiated and run groups themselves. For example, they have promoted the 'Friday Group' for parents and carers of children with a developmental delay or disability, and 'Lunch Bunch' which is in place to enable social networking. The parent voices' initiative, intended to act as a parents' forum, has not yet got off the ground.

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	80620
Local authority	Staffordshire
Inspection number	442834
Managed by	The local authority

Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	4,354
Group manager	Yusuf Hussain
Telephone number	01543 334316
Email address	yusuf.hussain@staffordshire.gov.uk

This group consists of the following children's centres:

- 22827: Springhill Children's Centre
- 20636: Charnwood Children's Centre

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