

Inspection report for Berwick Children's Centre

Local authority	Northumberland
Inspection number	362977
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Reporting inspector	Margaret Farrow HMI

Centre governance	Local Authority
Centre leader	Mrs Jan Casson
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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Linked school if applicable	n/a
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Sure Start Berwick Borough Nursery

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Introduction

The inspection addresses the centre's contribution to:

- facilitating access to early childhood services by parents, prospective parents and young children
- maximising the benefit of those services to parents, prospective parents and young children
- improving the well-being of young children.

The report is made to the local authority and a copy is sent to the children's centre. The local authority may send the report to such persons it considers appropriate and must arrange for an action plan to be produced in relation to the findings in this report.

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and one additional inspector. The inspectors held meetings with senior managers from the centre and the local authority, front-line professionals, parents, volunteers, members of the joint partnership board and a number of partners. Partners included representatives from the fire and rescue service, Citizen's Advice Bureau, Jobcentre Plus, library services and health practitioners.

The inspectors also observed the centre's work and looked at a range of documentation including key safeguarding documentation, the centre's self-evaluation form, quarterly performance information and service plan, case studies and a wide range of individual evaluations the centre holds about the quality and impact of the services provided.

Information about the centre

Berwick is a purpose-built children's centre and was developed in 2004 as a phase one Sure Start local programme. The centre has recently undergone a major building programme which has provided a number of additional facilities and resources. It is situated in a housing estate on the south-side of the river Tweed and its work extends across the town of Berwick and towards the rural heart of Northumberland to the borders of Scotland. It is linked to three other children's centres and the centre manager is the locality manager for all four. Together, the centres provide services to children and families across an area of over 700 square miles.

There are some significant pockets of disadvantage across the local area and Berwick traditionally has the lowest weekly-wage in England. Although the current proportion of children who live in workless families has reduced, it is above the national average and a significant proportion of jobs are of a part-time and/or a seasonal nature. The majority of the local community are of White British heritage. However, over the past six years there has been a growth in migrant families mainly from Poland, Lithuania, and Portugal. Due to its distance from major conurbations, Berwick suffers some

disadvantage in terms of service provision. For example, it has no major hospital, requiring families with sick children or women with difficult pregnancies to travel to either Wansbeck 60 miles away, or across the border to a hospital in Scotland, a journey of over 50 miles.

The centre provides day care and Early Years Foundation Stage provision for children aged from birth to three years and is open for 51 weeks a year. This provision, Sure Start Berwick Borough was subject to its own inspection. The inspection report of September 2009 can be found at www.Ofsted.gov.uk. The centre utilises a number of outreach venues in order to maximise families' access to services. These include fire and rescue stations, school community rooms, a Salvation Army building and community centres. Two play-buses provide play services to families in both town and rural areas, including to the local Traveller community. Governance arrangements are currently moving from a joint partnership board to an advisory board.

Inspection judgements

Grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Overall effectiveness

The effectiveness of the children's centre in meeting the needs of and improving outcomes for users and the wider community

2

Capacity for sustained improvement

The centre's capacity for sustained improvement, including the quality of its leadership and management

2

Main findings

Berwick children's centre provides good support to children and families and outcomes for them are least satisfactory and often good. Strengths include the impact of actions taken to ensure their safety, the good care, guidance and support provided and actions to improve their health and well-being. Parents describe the centre as providing a safe and welcoming environment and are confident that their children will be secure and well cared for. Safeguarding is paramount, and facilities, including those in the community, are rigorously checked. Staff are well trained in child protection procedures and systems for checking the suitability of staff and volunteers are exemplary. Children get off to a good start in the nursery and make good gains in their learning, given their varied starting points. This sustains them well as they move onto their schools and settings. A much higher proportion of children from this centre reach expected levels in their early learning goals than other children locally.

Partnership working is a particular strength. The centre manager develops and utilises partnerships to best effect to maximise scant resources, ensure equality of

provision and to meet identified needs, as far as possible, across the diverse area. Services are increasingly integrated to good effect. Shared actions taken to support, involve and improve outcomes for all, including pregnant teenagers, young mothers, children with special educational needs and/or disabilities, Traveller families and minority ethnic families are good. One parent eloquently summed up the views of a number when she said, 'The children's centre is a life-line for many parents and they could not do without it.' However, partnership working is judged good rather than outstanding because whilst the centre is very good at ensuring high quality provision through creative and flexible partnership working, it is not as successful in holding some partners to account for shared priorities through targets and contracts.

The centre is well known and well regarded across the local area and a great number of parents, carers and children access and use the services provided. Managers are constantly amending or developing services to respond to parent' or carers' views and requests. For example, they enable them to access hourly-sessions within the nursery to complement parents' or carers' part-time working arrangements. The centre is particularly successful at supporting families most in need. Their increasingly good use of the common assessment framework is helping to quickly identify needs, provide support or secure support from other agencies to meet those needs in the best way possible. As a result of this targeted, early prevention work, the numbers of children at risk of being taken into care is reducing well.

Strong actions are taken to ensure equality of opportunity and to tackle discrimination of any kind. Good local intelligence and understanding of the area identifies those who may benefit from all the centre has to offer, particularly traditionally hard to reach groups. Outreach work is pivotal in providing individual support to those in need, and in getting to know what services local communities would like. The centre responds wherever it can. For example, it works with partners such as the fire and rescue service and the Salvation Army to provide activities in their buildings where a local demand is identified. It also works with members of local minority ethnic communities, to provide Saturday schools and a baby group and the use of interpreters when necessary.

Leadership and management are good. Well supported by her team, the centre manager's drive, commitment and extensive partnership working with others has fostered a very strong sense of common purpose amongst providers; this has made a tangible difference to the outcomes for all who take part in the centre's work. Effective assessment of actions ensures all staff have a clear understanding of what is working well and what can be better. Outcomes for children and their families continue to improve; new facilities are being well planned to extend provision further. Consequently, the centre offers good value for money and shows good capacity for sustained improvement. Indeed, local performance information shows it is one of the best performing centres in the Northumberland area.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Hold all partners to account more fully for the impact of their work by ensuring their planned contributions are monitored and evaluated regularly against clear targets, milestones and use of resources.

How good are outcomes for users?

2

The centre promotes children's and their families' health and well-being successfully. For example, well-attended 'messy play' and family fun day events across the area promote fitness for all. Family support workers provide highly valued exercise classes in local settings such as fire stations. Courses such as 'Tasty Treats' and weaning courses help parents to understand the need for, and hone their skills in, preparing healthy food. Parents attending such courses say they are improving their own health and that of their children. The centre has funded a well regarded aqua-natal exercise programme, in close partnership with the centre's midwife, local maternity services and health visitors. Take-up is high and professionals take every opportunity to advise and support attendees, as well as signpost prospective mums, including teenage mums, to specialist services such as immunisations, dental care, smoking cessation and breast-feeding advice. Family support workers attend all '12-week scan' clinics for pregnant women and teenagers. Here they signpost all the centre has to offer and also inform them of the opportunity to be supported by peer-breastfeeding volunteers. Such actions are successfully increasing the number of mothers breastfeeding their children above the age of six weeks and making sure that a high proportion of prospective mums know about the services and support available.

The centre provides a haven for all who enter and children encounter a safe, harmonious atmosphere from the minute they enter. Well trained staff act as a good first point of contact for families and they deal sensitively and effectively with the varied needs and concerns they may have. Family support workers, early years practitioners and partners successfully support children and families who are facing temporary challenges in their lives, such as behaviour management or relationship difficulties. Parents and carers report positively on the impact of the centre's work on theirs and their children's confidence, self-esteem, personal, social and emotional development, and in helping them to build good relationships with their children.

Observations during the inspection and the centre's own good, detailed tracking information show that children make good progress in their learning, both in the nursery and in the activities they attend across the area. The centre provides a rich and inviting setting with exciting outdoor provision that promotes children's physical health and allows them to take risks in a safe, well supervised environment. Children are confident and curious about the world around them which they explore through carefully planned and evaluated activities. This ensures they achieve well and develop good personal and social skills. Children's behaviour is good as are relationships between adults and children across all settings. Transitions are particularly well managed. This includes daily transitions to the local wrap-around care early in the morning and later in the day. Consequently children are well-prepared for the next stage of their learning.

Children are encouraged to express their views and these are listened to and responded to where possible. Evaluations of activities and parents and carers who spoke to inspectors indicate that they are encouraged to review services and make suggestions for changes that may better meet their needs and interests. Information and advice to parents and carers on education, training and employment are good. They are encouraged to partake in learning opportunities to develop their own skills, confidence and competencies, and many do so. Parents and carers speak with enthusiasm about the positive impact that the Brilliant Babies course has had on their understanding of child development and their well-being. Such courses have led to an increasing number moving onto other courses, including accredited courses, and employment. Others are being helped to prepare for the world of work once they are ready.

Parents and carers value the provision of short-term day-care and crèche facilities that enables them to attend courses that would have been out of their reach otherwise. Crèche and day-care facilities are also used well to support vulnerable families in times of crises. Due to an identified need in the area, the centre has secured funding for an additional Citizen's Advice Bureau post. Although early in its work, a range of families have already secured additional benefits or debt management guidance as a result. Evaluations show how this has helped to reduce anxiety for some and improved their sense of well-being.

These are the grades for the outcomes for users

The extent to which children, including those from vulnerable groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles	2
The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	2
The extent to which all users enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	2
The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships and users contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	2
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents are developing economic stability and independence including access to training	2

How good is the provision?

2

The centre meets its core offer well. Good provision extends across the area's diverse communities. Partnerships with agencies, clear referral routes and good communications are increasingly making sure that the needs of children and their parents are identified and assessed quickly so that interventions and support can be targeted appropriately. The wide range of provision in the centre and in outreach settings is well attended. Participation rates are high because careful assessment of

need by managers is making sure that activities meet the range of needs and interests of the community. This includes the range of flexible outreach services which are successfully supporting more hard to reach families and children such as lone parents, teenage mums and Travellers. Outreach work is well focused and has resulted in an increase in referrals through the common assessment framework. Staff are proactive in developing these when needs are identified and this too ensures timely and appropriate care and support to families in need.

These are the grades for the quality of provision<

The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users	2
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all users	2
The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of users and the wider community	2
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to users within the centre and the wider community	2

How effective are the leadership and management?

2

Partners have high regard for the leadership and direction provided by the centre manager. They and staff share her high expectations and commitment to do the best for children and their families in Berwick and the dispersed areas which the centre serves. Shared priorities are making a positive difference to the safety and well-being of families. For example, in partnership with the fire and rescue service, they and family support workers have ensured that a high proportion of families have home risk-assessments and smoke alarms. As a result the proportion of fires in homes of children under the age of four has reduced significantly. Good partnership working with CEASE24 is successfully supporting families who suffer from domestic violence. Partnership working stretches resources further and good use of these limited resources is made to sustain key services where needs are identified. Whilst the centre staff go out of their way to support the partners to deliver or maintain delivery of services, they do not yet hold some of their partners fully to account for the impact of the work they do on the centre's behalf.

Performance management arrangements in the centre are robust. Staff have a clear understanding of their roles and are held to account successfully for their work through service plans and regular supervision. Priorities in service plans link effectively to the Children's Trusts priorities and vice versa. The change of governance from a joint partnership group to an advisory board is in its infancy. Nevertheless, effective performance management processes between the centre and the local authority have been enhanced so that there is no slippage in the delivery and evaluation of the centre's work. This includes regular review of progress towards key targets and comparison with other centres in Northumberland through an annual conversation and the children's centre improvement partners regular quarterly meetings. Accurate self-assessment identifies what is going well and what needs to

get better. For example, although the centre seeks out the views of parents and carers to develop services and has appointed parent and carer representatives for the advisory board, they are aware that more needs to be done to involve parents and carers in the governance of the centre locally. They have plans in place to widen representation.

Inclusion and equality of opportunity of all children and families lie at the heart of the centre's mission. Staff work tenaciously to remove any barriers to enable families to access the activities and services on offer and to meet any identified needs. For example, they provide one-to-one support in individual homes, vary the times and venues of courses, provide crèche facilities, hourly day-care, and take the play-bus out into rural areas and to where Traveller families actually live. Good support and signposting of services to families of, and children with, special educational needs and/or disabilities is helping them to meet their needs and help them achieve well in their learning and development. Co-located health visitors have good support in accessing additional services where children and parents need extra support or stimulation. The centre goes out of its way to promote and support self-help groups, such as the breastfeeding peer-support group and young mums' group. It currently pays the rental for 'Hydden Disabilities' parents' and carers' group regular meetings. Now the centre has more space, they will be returning rent-free.

These are the grades for leadership and management <

The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day to day management arrangements are clear and understood	3
The extent to which ambitious targets drive improvement, provision is integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community	2
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of users and the wider community	2
The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties	2
The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults	2
The extent to which evaluation is used to shape and improve services and activities	3
The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services the centre has been commissioned to provide	2
The extent to which the centre supports and encourages the wider community to engage with services and uses their views to develop the range of provision	3

Any other information used to inform the judgements made during this inspection

None

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Summary for centre users

We inspected Berwick Children's Centre on 24-25 September 2010. We visited a number of activities, looked at the centre's plans and documents and had discussions with some of you, members of staff and other professionals who work with the centre. Following this work we have judged the centre as good overall.

The centre has many strengths, including the actions taken to support your and your children's safety and well-being and the good quality care, guidance and support offered by all staff who work with you and your children. The way that the centre manager has worked with partners such as health visitors, managers in the maternity unit, the fire and rescue service and the Citizen's Advice Bureau to develop services locally is good. I really enjoyed speaking briefly to mums who were in Berwick fire station working-out, then going to see their babies having a good time with the nursery workers in the crèche. However, the centre is not as good as it could be in making sure some partners report back on the difference they are making. We have asked them to improve this aspect of their work.

The centre offers a good and increasing range of programmes and activities, including those aimed at improving the health of people in your local communities. It has been successful in helping new mums who choose to breastfeed their babies and recent courses such as Tasty Treats are helping mums to help their children eat healthily. Some things that are really good are the aqua-natal course and the way that family support workers try to get to the '12-week scan' for those of you who are recently pregnant. This helps them let future mums know about all the centre has to offer and to let them know about the advice available on breast feeding, from mums who have successfully breastfed their own children and know the good things and the concerns first-hand.

Parents we spoke to describe the centre as providing a safe and welcoming environment and are confident that their children will be secure and well cared for. Places we visited are also safe and secure and the centre manager has very strong procedures to make sure staff and volunteers are suitable to work with your children. Some parents explained just how important the centre is in theirs and their children's lives. They told us that staff listen to them and then make sure that they get the right advice. We found that the centre was really good at helping people at times in their lives when they most need it. Action is taken quickly and different people and

professionals work well as a team, to support both families and children. This includes good support to teenage mums, some of you who are fairly new to the country, parents and carers of, and children with, learning difficulties and/or disabilities, and Traveller families where the play-bus goes onsite weekly.

The quality of provision in the nursery is good and children make good progress there; this sets them up well for their eventual move to school where children from this centre generally achieve well in their early learning goals. The centre makes sure they check whether you have enjoyed any courses or sessions in the centre and across the community venues and they respond by making changes when you make comments. For example, they offer hourly-sessions for some of you who do part-time work. Those of you who take part in courses such as Brilliant Babies say how good it is in helping you to understand your children's development, in building your confidence and self-esteem and in helping you to develop good relationships with your babies. An increasing number of you are able to take advantage of other courses that are leading to accreditations and qualifications that will help you if you eventually return to work.

The centre is well-regarded in the local community because of the good leadership of the centre manager, the good commitment and support she has secured from her team and from the many partners with which she works. All are working hard to make sure that services are right for you and your children. Action plans are in place to make them even better. However, the centre manager wants parents to be more involved in determining what happens in the centre and has put plans in place to improve this. If any of you are willing to be more involved I am sure she will welcome you with open arms.

Thank you to everyone who took the time to speak to us, we are very grateful and we wish you every success for the future.

The full report is available from your centre or on our website www.ofsted.gov.uk.