

Northumberland – Central Group

Action for Children, Ashington Children's Centre, Alexandra Road, Ashington, Northumberland, NE63 9EF

Inspection date	23–25 October 2013		
Overall effectiveness	This inspection:	Good	2
	Previous inspection:	Not previously inspected	
Access to services by young children and families		Good	2
The quality of practice and services		Good	2
The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management		Good	2

Summary of key findings for children and families

This children's centre group is good.

- The local authority and Action for Children share a strong commitment to improving the lives of families with children aged under five years living in the Northumberland area. Senior managers have skilfully guided the group through an extended period of re-organisation of key personnel and services, whilst continually improving service delivery and up-skilling the staff team.
- The quality of information provided by the local authority about families attending the centre is excellent and provides accurate up-to-date evidence about performance. This is used effectively by the centre's senior leadership team to plan and deliver a range of good quality services which engage and benefit the large majority of local families, including those identified as most in need.
- Parents report that they feel very involved in the centre. Their views are regularly sought and they are proactive in shaping services, including making suggestions about learning programmes, timing of sessions and specific activities and outings for themselves and their children.
- The highly effective team of family support workers provide much needed support to some of the most vulnerable families in their homes. This combined with a strong partnership with health, has secured the engagement of a number of families who might otherwise have chosen not to access services.
- Safeguarding is well established ensuring the safety of children is at the heart of the centres' work.

It is not outstanding because:

- The local authority has been through a period of significant change. As a result, new local authority systems to monitor and evaluate the group's performance are not yet fully embedded. Priorities set out in the centre's action plan are accurate but not all have measureable success criteria. It is therefore difficult for staff to demonstrate when they have been successful in meeting their targets across the whole range of work they undertake.
- Despite a good range of training opportunities, the information held by adult learning partners on completion, success and progression rates is not always used systematically to track the learning journey of all adults and target groups, or to plan new ongoing programmes.
- Health outcomes for families in relation to sustaining breastfeeding beyond six to eight weeks and the number of mothers smoking during pregnancy are not yet good enough.

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 Ashington Children's Centre, Bedlington and Choppington Children's Centre, Morpeth Children's Centre, Pegswood Children's Centre and Newbiggin and Lynemouth Children's Centre.

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

The inspectors held meetings with the children's services manager for the Northumberland Central group and her senior leadership team, the early year's team, family support workers, officers from the local authority, social workers, the Northumberland Adult Learning team, Cease 24, Job Centre Plus and other local training partners. They also met health, education and early years partners, parents, volunteers, local headteachers and representatives from the advisory board. They looked at the centre's self-evaluation, action plans, a sample of case studies, safeguarding procedures and a range of other relevant documentation. Visits to activities were undertaken jointly with the children's centre managers and family support workers. Representatives from the local authority also attended all team meetings.

Inspection team

Jayne Utting	Her Majesty's Inspector, Lead Inspector
Pamela Blackman	Her Majesty's Inspector
Jackie Phillips	Additional Inspector
Joan Cawdron	Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about the group

Northumberland - Central Children's Centre group operates across five centres, Ashington, Bedlington and Choppington, Newbiggin and Lynemouth, Morpeth and Pegswood, and is located in the South East of the county. The five centres within this group operate across seven facilities. They are overseen by a children's services manager for the whole locality, who works with an experienced management team and operational staff based across the group's sites. The centres are within a radius of circa 15 miles, with between five and 10 miles between each centre. The reach population is around 5054 children aged nought to four years with 2436 living in the 30% most deprived or under wards. Worklessness in the area is a key issue, with around 35% of households with young children dependant on benefits. Latest figures indicate that 52% of children aged nought to four years who are on child protection plans and 38% of children in need live within the central locality. The area also has a high proportion of teenage parents, particularly within Ashington, Newbiggin and Lynemouth and Bedlington. In addition, 26% of children under five years with a disability live in the central locality. Over 90% of the population are of White British heritage. The area houses four settled traveller communities.

The local authority has commissioned Action for Children to run this children's centre group. There is one advisory board which oversees the running of this group.

Early years provision is provided through a number of early years settings, school nursery classes and childminders located within the locality. Children enter early years provision with skills, knowledge and abilities that are below those expected for their age especially in communication and language and personal, social and emotional development. The proportion of disabled children and those with special educational needs, including those with a statement of special educational needs, is above average. The primary schools and nearby early years settings were not part of this inspection as they are inspected separately. The reports are available on the Ofsted website at www.ofsted.gov.uk.

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

- Further drive continuous improvement across the group by ensuring that:
 - the local authority continues to work with centres to embed new, improved systems for monitoring and evidencing performance, and
 - the information held by adult learning partners on completion, success and progression rates is used systematically to track the learning journey of all adults and target groups and to plan new ongoing programmes.

- Build upon the existing strong partnerships with health colleagues to improve health outcomes for families across the reach area, particularly in relation to sustaining breastfeeding and reducing the number of mothers smoking during pregnancy.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Good

- Staff working across this centre group have an in-depth understanding of the needs of local families. This is informed by the centre's own activities, an accurate analysis of the excellent data provided by the local authority and effective partnerships with most other local agencies, particularly health. As a result, almost all families in the locality are known to the centre.
- The centre has been successful in ensuring that over 70% of local families are regularly involved in centre activities, the large majority of which live in the most deprived areas. However, regular contact rates with the most vulnerable families around the Morpeth and Pegswood Children's Centre are lower than for the rest of the group. This has been identified through effective monitoring, and plans to address this are already having an impact.
- Family support workers have been proactive in going out to local community groups and developing good links with schools, particularly those in areas where children have been identified as having poorer communication and language skills. This combined with integrated health and family support posts, effectively established for some years in Newbiggin by the sea and recently introduced in Morpeth Children's Centre, has led to notable improvements in participation rates.
- Through effective consultation and outreach work, centre staff are working with the large majority of young parents, families of children with disabilities and an increasing number of dads. The centres have been proactive in developing some strong partnerships at a locality level, for example, with local support groups and health. This has facilitated the engagement of an increasing number families experiencing domestic violence and low mood and ensured the provision of good support for families of children with disabilities through the inspirational 'Little Miracles' group.
- There has been some effective work undertaken with Gypsy Roma and Traveller families in the area where centres are near permanent sites. In areas that have unauthorised sites, centres have responded well by providing access via the play bus and working in partnership with the traveller education liaison officer.
- The uptake of free entitlement to early education for three and four year olds is good. The centres have been proactive in identifying those families who are eligible for two year old funding and as a result the numbers accessing this is high at 85%.

The quality of practice and services

Good

- An effective referral system and good multi-agency partnership working ensures families, including the most vulnerable, benefit from very targeted provision delivered by well trained experienced staff. Staff have a thorough understanding about social care thresholds and make appropriate referrals.
- Well qualified family support workers undertake in-depth assessments of the most vulnerable families. Work is very focused, with good tracking and monitoring of cases and confident analysis of risk. There is clear evidence of impact on improving the well-being and life chances of families, all of whom speak highly of the support they receive, 'they have turned my dreams into reality', said one parent.
- All partners and staff pay particularly good attention to the safety and well-being of families including home safety assessments and a wide range of safety advice and guidance. Parents in turn make good use of the advice offered to them, including opportunities to purchase home safety equipment, and speak confidently about how to keep their children safe.
- The children's centre group and their partners, deliver a wide range of good quality activities to improve parents' confidence and parenting ability. Centres are highly supportive in enabling parents to attend programmes and reduce inequalities, including help with transport and crèche facilities. Parents' evaluations are overwhelmingly positive about the difference this has made to them.
- Excellent support is provided to parents suffering domestic violence. One-to-one counselling is provided and those who are able also attend group programmes that help improve their

confidence as they take steps to move forward.

- An appropriate range of consistently well delivered training opportunities is offered to families including health and beauty courses, open university programmes and English and mathematics. Programmes generally lead to qualifications and have been extremely well received by parents. However, the information held by adult learning partners on completion, success and progression rates is not used systematically by the group to track the learning journey of target participants or to plan new programmes in line with identified need.
- The group and its partners pay good attention to supporting the health of parents and children and attractive and well presented displays reinforce messages about being healthy. Families consistently report the range of provision is improving their understanding of how to keep themselves and their children healthy including good dental hygiene. However, the percentage of mothers sustaining breastfeeding and the number choosing to stop smoking during pregnancy, whilst improving, is not yet good enough. Centres and partners continue to develop strategies to address this including targeting health clinics, peer support volunteers, support groups and also working more closely with grandparents.
- Where children attend school or registered early years provision, the majority make good progress. Activities undertaken in centres prepare children well for school including some excellent transition arrangements. Of particular note is the emphasis placed on speech and language which is reinforced by all partners, with parents supported to continue this learning in the home.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

Good

- The local authority views children's centres as an integral part of the delivery and success of its early intervention strategy. Following a period of re-organisation, new and improved systems to monitor the performance of centres have been developed. These are in the early stages of implementation and need time to embed, including the setting of some more precise, ambitious targets in order to drive improvement forward at an even greater pace.
- Service delivery across the Northumberland Central locality is strengthened further due to the values and leadership of Action for Children. The children's services manager is relentless in her pursuit to improve the lives of families living in this Northumberland locality and professionals spoken to recognise her leadership as 'inspirational' and 'excellent'. This combined with clear procedures for working with key partners, has secured real and sustained improvements for a large majority of families and represents an efficient use of resources.
- There are clear priorities identified both for the group as a whole and its individual centres. The local authority, managers and staff at all levels have a clear understanding of the strengths and areas for development within the group. As a result, self-evaluation is accurate and demonstrates a precise knowledge of the needs of the area.
- Staff are highly qualified. Opportunities for continuous professional development are encouraged and staff feel well supported and highly valued because professional supervision is embedded in the work of the group, and all are encouraged to progress within the staff structure.
- Parents spoken to throughout the inspection value the work of the group highly. 'The staff really care. They never judge you and make you feel part of something really special', is how one parent described her experience. Individuals recounted powerful stories of the difference the centre has made to their lives.
- There are good examples of parents' views shaping service delivery and design and several parent forums are established. This was clearly evidenced during a 'Fulfilling Lives' consultation meeting attended by inspectors. The group has recently moved to having one advisory board, with a local parent taking on the role as its chair. Key partners are engaged and Action for Children has ensured the provision of good quality training and information so all members are aware of their roles and responsibilities and are supported to offer appropriate challenge.
- Safeguarding policies and procedures are in place and implemented. All staff are aware of what to do if there is a concern about a child's well-being or safety. The use of the local Common

Assessment Framework is well established in the area and used appropriately and well. Strong local relations with children's social care and health colleagues ensure close joint working and information sharing, particularly for those subject to a child protection plan, looked after children and those identified as in need.

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	80019
Local authority	Northumberland
Inspection number	424802
Managed by	Action for Children on behalf of the local authority

Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	5054
Centre leader	Gill Physick
Date of previous inspection	Not Applicable
Telephone number	01670 819988
Email address	Gillian.Physick@actionforchildren.org.uk

This group consists of the following children's centres:

- 20126 Ashington children's centre
- 20242 Bedlington and Choppington children's centre
- 22111 Newbiggin and Lynemouth children's centre
- 22052 Morpeth children's centre
- 22349 Pegswood children's centre

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