

Inspection report for Alders Children's Centre

Local authority	Bracknell Forest
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Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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Linked school if applicable	Not applicable
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Not applicable

The inspection of this Sure Start Children's Centre was carried out under part 3A of the Childcare Act 2006 as inserted by section 199 of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009.

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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 an additional inspector and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the centre manager and staff, representatives from the local authority and the advisory board. They also spoke to partner agencies, such as the health services, parents and other users of the centre.

They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation including the centre's action plan.

Information about the centre

The centre was designated in 2007 as a phase two centre, operating out of community venues until a purpose-built building opened in September 2009. It received full core purpose status in November 2009. It is managed directly by the local authority. The centre is open 51 weeks of the year on weekdays and occasional Saturdays and evenings. It serves 12 socially-mixed super output areas in and around Sandhurst, none of which are identified as being amongst the most disadvantaged nationally. There are 1,045 children under five in the reach area; 38% are registered with the centre. Most families come from a White British background, although there is large Nepalese community drawn to the area because of the military academy. There are also a number of settled Traveller families in the area. The percentage of children aged from birth to four living in households dependent on workless benefits and the number of eligible families benefiting from the childcare element of Working Tax Credit are both much lower than average. Children's levels on entry to early years education across the reach area are variable but largely in line with that expected for their age with communication, language and literacy skills slightly below.

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 families

3

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

3

Main findings

Alders Children’s Centre is providing a satisfactory service. The outcomes for families who use the centre are good, particularly in the way children learn and develop and in how families are cared for. This is because staff have a keen awareness of safeguarding procedures and there are strong links with partners, especially the health services, that make an effective contribution to outcomes. Parents who use the centre are highly appreciative of the support they get, with a common view being that ‘staff go beyond what is expected of them’. However, although the centre does have contact with families from all target groups and registration figures are increasing, the spread of that contact is not sufficiently wide and some groups, such as lone families, are under represented. This is partly due to the relatively short time the centre has been fully operational and also because of a lack of reach area specific data to allow the centre to analyse the target groups.

Those who use the centre feel fully involved in it and are certain their views are listened to. However, a parents’ forum has only recently been convened and so there is no formal method to ensure parents play a strategic role in the development of the centre and there is not wide representation of target groups on the advisory board. The advisory board has been strengthened since the present centre manager took up her post 15 months ago, but members are not yet fully involved in the centre’s self-evaluation and in developing the action plan, although they do review both documents in an adequate way. Furthermore, the action plan, whilst identifying the appropriate priorities, does not have specifically focused and easily measurable targets.

Well-trained and knowledgeable staff are committed to improve outcomes and extend the work they do. Where the impact can be measured and other evidence supports it, there has been a positive impact on outcomes despite the centre’s short history. There is a clear understanding of the strengths and areas for development based on accurate self-evaluation and a concerted drive to increase the numbers who use and benefit from the centre. Consequently, there is a satisfactory capacity for sustained improvement.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Increase the number of families who access the centre by using data to focus services at some target and hard-to-reach groups, particularly lone families and those in the most deprived areas.
- Involve families in the strategic management and governance of the centre so that their views are fully taken into account by:
 - increasing involvement in, and awareness of, the parents' forum
 - formalising the way parents' views are recorded, acted upon and fed on to the advisory board
 - ensuring there is more representation from target groups on the advisory board.
- Strengthen the role of the advisory board so that it is more involved in the centre's self-evaluation, and improve the centre's action plan so that targets are measurable, specific and challenging by:
 - increasing the strategic role of members in evaluating the centre's performance
 - gathering and using data to measure the centre's impact in more aspects.

How good are outcomes for families?

2

Health visitors and midwives are based in the children's centre and this has had a significant impact on the numbers who engage well with health services. In addition, a strong focus on encouraging healthy lifestyles through courses such as Mind-Exercise-Nutrition-Do-it (MEND), developing the outdoor area and activities led by Play Rangers have led to a large majority of families who use the centre developing a good understanding of how to keep themselves healthy. Consequently, childhood obesity levels are falling, down from 14% to 9.8%, sustained breastfeeding rates are being maintained at above the national level and immunisation rates are high. Having identified an increasing need for help with mental health problems, including postnatal depression, the centre has been proactive in working effectively with health partners to put in high levels of effective support with a consequent beneficial impact for targeted families

Keeping families safe and protected is a high priority for all staff and their wide range of training reflects this. Recent 'Motivational Interviewing' training to help identify and support domestic abuse victims has been effective in aiding adults and children. Parents are given many opportunities to develop their parenting skills through structured courses, such as 'Time Out for Parents', and these also enhance their self-esteem and confidence, as highlighted by common views such as, 'I felt elated,' and, 'It was a huge confidence boost.'

Everyone spoken to during the inspection emphasised their confidence in the staff and how they feel able to discuss even the most difficult issues with them. 'I feel

comfortable with them and get on with them like a friend,' was a common view. Because of this and the good partnerships that exist, the number of child protection and Common Assessment Framework plans in the reach area is minimal despite the numbers being relatively high in the local authority as a whole. Emergency hospital admission data for the authority as a whole show low levels of admissions, although these data are not broken down to the reach area.

Children and adults using the centre show high levels of enjoyment during activities such as 'Little Explorers' and 'New Beginnings'. Close links with the adjacent infant school and well-trained staff mean that there is strong focus on early learning and especially in developing communication, language and literacy skills. The impact is reflected in a consistently improving trend in the numbers of children reaching the levels expected for their age at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage (up from 54.5% in 2010 to 70% in 2011) and in narrowing the achievement gap between the lowest 20% and the rest.

Children are well prepared for the transition to school as their confidence and independent skills develop well, through, for example, Forest School sessions which allow children to explore and learn in an exciting natural environment. Adults' skills are also being developed well with language courses aimed specifically at the Nepalese community and literacy courses to support those who wish to return to work. All of the families spoken to felt that their parenting, communication and personal development had improved significantly through coming to the centre.

Children have good relationships and behave well because of the emphasis on their personal development and the good role modelling of centre staff. Families feel fully involved in decision making and their views are taken into account, such as setting up a new group for 'in-between' age children. However, although there is some parent representation on the advisory board, this is not well established, nor is the parents' forum. This is something the centre is aware of and has plans to rectify.

The numbers of families who benefit from the childcare element of Working Tax Credit or are dependent on workless benefits are very low in the reach area. Consequently, the centre focuses its work on developing other skills such as paediatric first aid, parenting skills and enhancing confidence and self-esteem, and the majority of families using the centre have been engaged in such activities. Where families do need support to return to work, this is offered effectively in the form of practical help with curriculum vitae and signposting to help with benefits and childcare. As a result, it is not unusual for parents to find, and sustain, work or gain additional qualifications.

These are the grades for the outcomes for families:

The extent to which children, including those from target groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles	2
The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare	2

concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	
The extent to which all children and parents, including those from target groups, 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 parents, including those from target groups, contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	3
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future, and parents, including those from target groups, are developing economic stability and independence including access to training and employment.	2

How good is the provision?

3

Staff understand the needs of those who use the services and tailor support to meet these, so that outcomes for those families are generally good. An example of this is evident in the way that they have set up a weekly support group for lone parents, 'Solitaire'. However, although the numbers overall using the centre have increased, especially over the past year, and participation rates are high, there is a lack of data to enable the centre to identify what proportion of some target groups, such as lone parents, is being reached. Nonetheless, the centre has contact with all target groups in the reach area and has identified its specific hard-to-reach groups as Travellers and Nepalese families. It has been proactive in engaging these families, contacting the relevant agencies and setting up specific groups for them. Although this has had mixed results with some groups having to close through lack of response, the centre is committed to adapting support and working to improve learning and skills so that it is good for all groups in the future.

Achievement is celebrated well with self-esteem raised as a result. For example, photographs in the local newspaper after the successful completion of the MEND course, made participants proud of their achievements. The centre provides well for children's early development through well-planned enjoyable sessions, and clear guidance for parents to help children learn. The use of various community venues, especially in areas deemed to be of greatest need, has increased the numbers accessing the centre. However, whilst all target groups are engaging with the centre to some extent and the outcomes for those who do are good, there are some groups who are not yet doing so in sufficient numbers.

Families who use the centre are unanimous in the view that they receive high levels of care, guidance and support. A view that summed up that of many was, 'The best thing I ever did was to contact the centre.' In many cases the support given, especially in times of crisis or for sensitive issues, has had a profound impact on families' lives. The close working proximity of the health teams means that well-targeted support can be arranged almost immediately with a positive impact on outcomes for the families involved.

These are the grades for the quality of provision:

The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	3
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups	3
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups.	2

How effective are the leadership and management?

3

Staff are well supervised at all levels and the day-to-day management of the centre is good. There is a clear sense of purpose and team ethos amongst all staff. However, although governance and accountability arrangements are now clear and understood, the members of the advisory board are relatively new and have not had time to be fully effective in the strategic planning and self-evaluation of the centre. In addition, whilst there is an accurate understanding of strengths and areas for development from the centre manager and the local authority, and the views of families are taken into account, this is not yet transferred to the action plan in the form of targets that are measurable or specific enough.

Centre resources, especially the small staff team, are managed well. Good use is made of community locations and families are happy that the centre meets their needs. Outreach work is successfully commissioned out to Parents and Children Together (PACT), but this work is case load and time limited and, as such, has a restricted impact in increasing the numbers who use the centre. Despite increasing numbers accessing services overall, there is an awareness that some groups are under represented and so the centre gives satisfactory value for money.

The centre is inclusive and welcoming and celebrates diversity effectively, such as through displays and posters highlighting the Traveller culture. All the sites used are accessible to disabled families and the centre meets its statutory duties in this regard. Crèche facilities and some evening and weekend activities, such as 'Dads and Kids', enable those who work and/or fathers to benefit from the services. Nepalese families are supported through translation help and specific group work. Families with disabled children are given effective support with behaviour issues for example. The centre can point to successes in narrowing the achievement gap for some families, but it is aware that with more pertinent data it would be able to target and include even more in the community who use the centre.

Safeguarding procedures and training are strong. All appropriate Criminal Records Bureau checks are carried out and the relevant assurances given by partner agencies. All staff, including administrative staff, are trained in child protection, multi-agency working and in Common Assessment Framework matters.

Consequently, they are confident in participating in these and child protection conferences such as through the Children’s Holistic Integrated Learning and Development (CHILD) pathway. An awareness of increasing levels of domestic violence has led to training for all staff which means they are quick to spot and act on any concerns with very positive outcomes for the families concerned. Key to the good safeguarding is the effective partnerships that exist with many agencies such as the health services. Good partnerships also impact positively on outcomes for families using the centre through high-quality early years support from settings in the area, speech and language therapy, Homestart and Traveller education services. There are also good links with the Royal Military Academy which have positive benefits for the families living on the base.

All families spoken to during the inspection were full of praise for the staff and eager to share how the centre had helped them. The centre does ask for feedback from families after specific courses or activities and uses this to shape services, but has not conducted an annual survey that resulted in meaningful numbers responding. In addition, although set to increase, there are few volunteers at present and the formal involvement of families in relation to governance is limited.

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 effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secure improvement in outcomes	3
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	3
The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties	3
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 partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services provided by the centre to meet its core purpose	2
The extent to which the centre supports and encourages families in the reach area 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

Not applicable.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Alders Children's Centre on 11 and 12 January 2012. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

During our visit, we looked at your centre's action plan and numerous other documents. We spoke to a range of partner agencies working with the centre as well as staff, members of the advisory board and representatives from the local authority. We also visited several centre activities taking place during the inspection such as 'Little Explorers', 'New Beginnings' and 'Solitaire', and spoke to a substantial number of families using the centre.

Thank you for your participation in the inspection. It was very helpful to have your input. Those of you we spoke to were very positive about what the centre does for you and especially in the way your children have learned and developed and how you have grown in confidence in how to help them. Typical views voiced during the inspection were, 'It has improved my well-being,' and, 'I've had a huge confidence boost.' Although it has only been fully functioning for a relatively short period of time and the centre manager has been in post for just over a year, there are already signs that the centre is having an impact on families who attend. For example, you are well equipped to lead healthy lifestyles, aided by having the health visitors and midwives based at the centre.

A strong aspect of the centre is the way it safeguards those who use it, which means that you all feel safe and confident in the staff. This is something that many of you appreciate summed up by comments such as, 'I feel comfortable and get on with them like a friend.' In addition, you feel that the staff are very caring, helpful and committed to supporting you and your family. 'Staff go beyond what is expected of them,' was the view of many. Strong partnership working with a wide range of different agencies also leads to generally good outcomes for families who use the centre.

The centre is aware of the need to increase the numbers who are accessing the services, especially from certain groups in the area who would benefit most. We have asked the centre to do this by using data about the local area to see where the gaps are in the groups who are using the centre. We have also asked that the role of

the relatively new advisory board is strengthened so that members are fully involved in setting ambitious targets to improve outcomes for more in the local community. In addition, although families' views are sought and acted upon, such as in setting up the 'Little Explorers' group to meet the needs of 'in-between' age children, the way this is done is not formal enough. We have asked the centre to involve the parents' forum more in decision making and management of the centre and to widen the range of families who are represented on the advisory board.

The centre runs smoothly on a day-to-day basis and all staff are committed to continue to improve the numbers who use the services and to maintain the good outcomes for those who already attend. As a result and with an accurate understanding of the centre's strengths and areas for development, the centre is satisfactorily placed to continue to improve.

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