

Inspection report for Blakenall Sure Start Children's Centre

Local authority	Walsall
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Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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Linked school if applicable	
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Blakenall Sure Starters Nursery [URN: EY275898]

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 one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with parents and carers, the centre manager and her deputies, centre staff and staff from partner agencies, and senior representatives from Serco and the advisory board.

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

Information about the centre

Blakenall Children's Centre is a phase 1 purpose-built phase one centre funded by the local authority and designated in October 2005. Provision is offered in the centre and nearby community venues as well as through outreach family support workers. A registered nursery shares the building, and is open from Monday to Friday from 8am to 6pm for 51 weeks of the year. It offers full day care and sessional care to a maximum of 44 children. The centre is also adjacent to the Valley Nursery School, which offers day care for children aged three to four, including before- and after-school and holiday provision. Children progress from the centre to a number of different primary schools in the neighbourhood.

The centre is currently overseen by Serco on behalf of Walsall Borough Council, but this arrangement is due to finish in 2013 when the centre is expected to revert to direct local authority control. The centre is open five days a week with occasional Saturday sessions. The range of activities offered either in the centre or through outreach work includes massage, yoga and ballet for babies, midwife and health visitor checks, breastfeeding support, parenting support, a wide range of speech and language development activities, stay and play sessions in neighbouring schools as well as the local settled Traveller site, and child development activities in the on-site nursery or the crèche.

The centre is located in a former New Deal for Communities regeneration area and serves the most disadvantaged ward in Walsall, itself ranked as the 45th most disadvantaged district in England. The reach area covers 1,099 children aged 0-4. It has the highest rate of teenage conception in Walsall, which is twice the national average, above-average childhood obesity rates and high levels of youth crime. Half of Walsall's looked after children live in the reach area. Over half the adults in the area have no qualifications and high numbers of families live on disability living allowance, income support or lone parent support.

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

2

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

1

Main findings

Blakenall is a good children's centre. In an area with significant levels of deprivation, outcomes for children are improving well as a result of the diligent and persistent work of the centre to engage with a rapidly growing number of families despite widespread concern about contact with authority figures. The centre improves the health and school readiness of some of the most disadvantaged children in the borough, which is readily noticed by their parents. In the words of one parent, 'When my older child moved from the nursery to school, she settled in very quickly because she knew a lot of the children there.' However, the centre has been less successful to date in reducing the high numbers of mothers who smoke.

A thorough assessment of the needs of each individual family, coupled with the excellent partnership work with several health professionals, contributes to the good provision in the centre and the rapid growth in the number of families being helped. Care and support for families is excellent as a result of this careful assessment and the passion and commitment of the staff. The high level of trust which outreach and family-support workers build with families enables them to refer often anxious parents to a specialist health professional who might otherwise rarely see the children. Good transition arrangements with primary schools in the borough help children to settle quickly when they transfer, particularly where the schools are engaged with the centre in offering activities such as 'Stay and Play'. This, in turn, helps to improve children's attainment in their first year at school at a faster rate

than elsewhere in the borough.

Parents are closely involved in many aspects of the work of the centre, and contributed to the design of the new building. They routinely comment on the quality of activities and courses they have attended with their children, and this feedback is used well by the centre to publicise its work, for example through the attractive newsletter. This has contributed to the centre's success in the last year in doubling the number of families it works with, with almost all the new families being in the 10% identified as most disadvantaged. However, the centre has been less successful in engaging with fathers.

Safeguarding arrangements are excellent, well understood by staff, and supported by regularly refreshed extensive multi-agency training. Families feel very safe in the centre and support the centre in giving the protection of their children the highest priority. A well-maintained single centre record confirms that staff directly employed in the centre are appropriately checked and partner agencies are required to confirm in writing that their staff are similarly checked. All managers have undergone safer recruitment training. The strong emphasis on safeguarding extends to the well-being of staff, particularly those in direct contact with families, who have regular supervision and an innovative means of alerting the centre if they are in trouble.

Self-evaluation is informed by regular and detailed feedback from parents and staff on activities, and provides an excellent overview of the centre's performance. As a result, the centre makes continual improvements to its work, which has had a particular impact on children's improved school readiness. Coupled with challenging improvement plans, good access to and understanding of local intelligence and performance data, and passionate and committed leadership across the centre, this contributes to the centre's excellent capacity to improve.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- continue to increase the proportion of families who are engaged with the centre to ensure the centre meets its target at the end of the current year
- work with health partners to find ways to reduce the number of mothers who are smoking when their children are born
- extend the good work already taking place with some primary schools to as many neighbourhood schools as possible to help improve children's attainment in their first year
- draw on the views of parents to find ways to encourage and enable more fathers to join their children in centre activities.

How good are outcomes for families?

2

Outcomes are good for the majority of families who are targeted by the centre as being in most need. Families demonstrate very positive improvement in understanding the importance of healthy eating and exercise for their children from

the youngest age. Initiatives, such as 'Baby Ballet' as well as more traditional activities, such as baby massage, baby yoga and healthy eating promotion in all programmes, are resulting in a gradual reduction in childhood obesity. One parent summed up the benefits when she said, 'Seeing how much my child enjoyed these sessions gave me the enthusiasm to join adult exercise classes.' Immunisation rates are above the average for Walsall because of the excellent support and encouragement given by staff to parents, often including accompanying mothers to the clinic and holding the baby for the injection. Despite a slight improvement, teenage conception rates remain high and the high proportion of teenage mothers may be one factor in the low levels of breastfeeding. Smoking among mothers is high. The centre finds it difficult to assess its work in promoting good dental care because of a lack of data.

Staff attendance at child-concern meetings is excellent and this helps to protect children. The excellent 'Mellow Parenting' course makes a significant contribution to parents' ability and confidence in managing their child's behaviour. As one father said, 'I think every parent should be made to attend one of these courses.' The centre provides a good range of home-safety equipment, such as safety gates, smoke alarms and fireguards, cupboard child locks and window locks. This strong focus on safety in the home helps to reduce the number of hospital admissions. Safeguarding arrangements in the centre are excellent, and extended to outings through robust and carefully considered risk assessments. Zones protected by electronic door locks help parents to recognise the importance of making their children feel safe in the centre. The Common Assessment Framework (CAF) is used very well in protecting children and the centre CAF champion has excellent links with key staff and agencies across the borough. When families move to a different centre, information is shared between the centres to ensure a smooth transition.

Children clearly enjoy attending the centre and their parents recognise this enjoyment and growth in confidence. As one mother said, 'Before coming to the centre my daughter was incredibly shy and would not speak to any other children; now she can't wait to come to the nursery as she is so eager to see her friends.' Educational attainment has traditionally been low in this area but Blakenall is one of only four children's centres in the borough that has helped bring about an improvement in children's ability at the start of their schooling. Schools in contact with the centre report improved engagement by children and parents as a result of the work of the centre, and in one case, the outreach 'Stay and Play' provision is having a noticeable positive impact even after only one term. While the centre is contributing to improving children's ability overall, the gap between those with the lowest ability levels when they start school and those at the average is reducing more slowly.

Staff promote a culture of respect and non-judgemental interventions with families that in some cases is successfully breaking down years of parents' suspicion of authority figures and building trust among families who are most in need of help but often the most reluctant to engage. One parent summed up this relationship when she said, 'I see a couple of the staff as friends now because they have given me and

my son so much help.'

The centre makes good use of apprenticeships to support and encourage parents to progress to employment. There has been a very small improvement in employment take-up among parents, but low aspirations deter many parents from seeking to improve their employability skills.

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 concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	1
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	2
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	3

How good is the provision?

2

Centre staff have a very good understanding of their reach area and the families most in need of help. The range of services offered meets the needs of the most disadvantaged families well, with particular emphasis on catering for children with disabilities or additional needs, lone parents, teenage parents or families with children identified as being at risk of harm. The centre concentrates its efforts on engaging with children and families in these groups which it identifies using good quality information and data from health partners and the local authority. The proportion of families that now engage with the centre has more than doubled over the past year, and the centre is well on track to meet its target of 50% engagement by the end of this year. This improvement is the result of many years of patient and tenacious community engagement, which, coupled with excellent partnership working with health professionals, enables the centre to provide a very wide range of information, advice and support to parents that they would otherwise not experience or be reluctant to accept.

The quality of childcare in the on-site nursery and the adjacent nursery school is outstanding. This helps to ensure that children are well prepared and eager for the transition to primary school. Parents, too, benefit from the excellent advice on how to encourage their children's learning at home by building on what the children do in the nursery. Several have joined the local library and some have gained the knowledge and confidence to provide a healthy diet for their children because of

activities in the centre, such as how to hide vegetables in soup for those who are initially reluctant to try them.

The centre recognises that it needs to build on the excellent progress made over the last year in engaging with families and that it needs to improve the engagement of fathers with its work. One parent commented, 'My husband has really enjoyed the weekend sessions, and my children really enjoy bringing dad along to show him what they do in the week.' The discontinuation of the regular scheduled visits by a mobile dental service has made it more difficult to promote to all parents the benefits of good oral hygiene for very young children.

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	2
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups	2
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups	1

How effective are the leadership and management?

2

Leadership and management are good. Actions to improve outcomes, especially engagement, are concerted, long term and beginning to be effective. Overall performance has improved. Targets are realistic but challenging and accurately recognise the needs of families in the area. Regular and well-informed scrutiny and challenge by the advisory board means that members have a very good understanding of the performance of the centre and identify areas for development. The board has developed good links with other centres and schools to promote sharing of good practice and encourage feedback on what works well. Excellent day-to-day leadership in the centre means that staff are very well supported, for example through regular supervision for those working directly with families, as well as being strongly encouraged and supported to take up training and development opportunities.

Effective joint working with partner agencies and professionals, such as speech and language therapists, midwives and health visitors, helps to make the best use of resources. Combined with the efficient and flexible use of the well-maintained centre accommodation, this ensures the centre provides good value for money. The excellent focus on meeting the needs of each individual child and the family ensures equality of access to the services for all. This is particularly true for families whose children have additional support needs or a disability, most of whom are integrated into mainstream schools when they leave the centre. Work with settled Travellers has been particularly successful at engaging this traditionally reluctant community.

Outstanding safeguarding arrangements ensure that children whose families engage

with the centre are safe. Staff and visitors are appropriately checked, the centre maintains a single central record of CRB (criminal records bureau) checks and obtains confirmation that partner agencies carry out similar checks on their staff. Child protection training for the staff is regularly refreshed and is effective. Staff understand well their role in identifying children at risk of harm. Staff, too, are protected through an innovative coded message to use when contacting the centre manager if they feel in personal danger in the centre or during a home visit.

Through the parents' forum and representation on the advisory board, parents have been actively involved in running the centre from the very beginning. They contributed to the design of the new building and outdoor play area, helped draw up a funding bid to visit a school in Italy to study the benefits of the Emilio Reggia programme and are routinely involved in planning and evaluating activities. One outcome of this involvement was the introduction of creative arts and craft activities into the centre, facilitated by visiting artists.

Staff performance is monitored through an annual formal appraisal system. However, target setting is insufficiently specific to ensure that staff can easily measure their progress and recognise for themselves when they have achieved a goal.

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	2
The effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secure improvement in outcomes	2
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	2
The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties	1
The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults	1
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	1
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	2

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

The inspection of the on-site nursery in January 2011 and the inspection of the linked Valley Nursery in June 2009 helped to inform the findings in this report.

Both nursery settings were judged to be outstanding.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Blakenall Sure Start Children's Centre on 8 and 9 February 2012. We judged the centre as good overall.

We would like to thank all of you who spared the time to talk to us about the centre and how much the staff help you and your children. Your comments were very important in helping us to understand what a difference the centre is making.

You told us that the centre makes a real difference to your lives and those of your children. Many of you pointed in particular to how the staff have helped you to be more confident when you have needed to deal with other services or agencies, such as health visitors or therapists. Several of you were enthusiastic about the 'Mellow Parenting' courses which you said had had such a calming effect on you and, as a result, had helped your child to become calmer. As one of you said, 'A calm child is a happy child.' We found that a lot more families are coming to the centre or one of its activities in neighbouring schools and community centres with their children, and that some of this is the result of your enthusiasm to share your good experiences. All of you told us how much the staff have gone out of their way to help you and your children individually, and some of you said that you saw the staff as friends. Some of you have gone on to join the parents' forum because of your experience.

We saw how well the centre protects your children while they are there, making sure that managers carry out the proper checks before anyone starts working with your children, and that you understand how important it is to have systems, such as the electronic door locks and intercom entry to protect children. We saw how much your children enjoy their time in the centre, making friends with other children, and confidently showing us what they were doing during our visit. You all told us how safe you feel in the centre as well, and that you know you can talk to the staff about anything that is worrying you about your children without being criticised. We know that the excellent nursery is making a real difference to how well your children settle into school when they start, and how much happier you feel as a result. This is particularly true where the centre has close links with the school, and so we have asked the centre to extend these good links to more schools in the neighbourhood.

We know that several of you were involved in the design of the very welcoming new building that now houses the centre, and that you continue to tell the staff what you

think is good and what they could improve. We met some of you who are members of the parents' forum or the advisory board, and we were impressed with how well informed you are about the centre's work. We know that some of you have suggested that the centre should try to put on more activities that fathers can join in, and we agree that this would be a good development.

We think that the centre helps to make improvements in many aspects of your children's lives. However, there are more families that could benefit, so we have asked them to keep up their good work in getting more parents to bring their children to the centre. We also want them to help more of you to give up smoking. We think there are excellent opportunities for the centre to make these improvements.

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