

Inspection report for Smith's Wood Children's Centre

Local authority	Solihull
Inspection number	362569
Inspection dates	10–11 November 2010
Reporting inspector	Tim Bristow HMI

Centre governance	Solihull Children's Centre Improvement Board
Centre leader	Marian Davis
Date of previous inspection	
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Linked school if applicable	N/A
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Wood 'N' Tots Nursery

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.

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.

An inspection of the maintained nursery was carried out at the same time as the inspection of the centre under Section 5 of the Education Act 2005. The report of this inspection is available on our website www.ofsted.gov.uk.

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an additional inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the local authority, centre staff, representatives from the partnership advisory board, representatives from services that use the centre and users.

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

Information about the centre

This is a phase 1 children's centre providing the core offer to a community which is in one of the 30% most deprived wards in the country and includes eight super output areas. The centre provides a range of services that include health, family support, adult training and early years advice and guidance. Solihull local authority has a contract with 'Action for Children' to manage all the children's centres in North Solihull of which Smith's Wood is one. The centre leader manages seven centres and the centre coordinator has specific leadership responsibility for Smith's Wood Children's Centre. The children's centre improvement board holds the centre to account through its business plan and contract with 'Action for Children'. There is also a partnership board that represents users, the local community and service partners. The Wood 'N' Tots Nursery is managed by the centre coordinator and is subject to separate inspection arrangements. The Nursery was inspected during the week of this inspection.

Regeneration of the local area has resulted in an unusually large transient population, as families move out of property to be demolished and others move into

property that is new. There is a high number of workless families' dependant on state benefits. The rate of unemployment and the proportion of people who leave school without qualifications are higher than the average. The proportion of teenage parents is above average, as is the proportion of obese children of Reception age. There is a small minority of families from minority ethnic backgrounds. The majority of children enter early years settings with skill development that is below national expectations.

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

3

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

3

Main findings

The overall effectiveness of the centre is satisfactory because the outcomes for users within the Smith's Wood reach area are satisfactory. The centre users are unanimous in their appreciation and praise for the improvements to their lives as a result of taking advantage of the services and activities provided. The impact of these services on outcomes overall is only satisfactory because there are families and children in the community who are not yet taking advantage of them. Consequently, the equality of opportunity for users in the reach area is satisfactory. The centre is well aware of this and has taken some of the necessary steps to improve this situation, such as the recently formed cluster groups facilitated by the centre to support the educational development of children in all the settings in the community. This is already beginning to bear fruit, as assessment results show that children's skill development in communication, language and literacy is improving.

While provision overall is satisfactory, the care, guidance and support of users are good. This is underpinned by good procedures to safeguard children and other users. All the users spoken to were very happy and secure about the welcome and care that they receive in the centre. One particularly strong feature is the team around the child procedures to support vulnerable families. These are particularly effective in integrating all the necessary services to ensure the safety and well-being of users. The procedures for assessing the needs of the users and then providing the appropriate services are satisfactory.

Governance and leadership are satisfactory and improving. The local authority procedures to hold 'Action for Children' to account through its local priorities are

strengthening through its annual accountability meetings. The centre's business plan demonstrates a good understanding of the target groups within the reach area and what needs to be achieved. However, the success criteria are not sharp enough so that it is difficult for the centre to evaluate the success of its activities in meeting local priorities or for 'Action for Children' to hold leaders to account for their work. The partnership board that represents the community and services is successful at enabling its participants to voice their opinions about services needed and champion the community. However, its purpose in overseeing the work of the children's centre is unclear.

The centre coordinator and other leaders demonstrate a passion and determination to improve the lives of users. The recent inspection of the Wood 'N' Tots Nursery managed by the centre coordinator demonstrates her good ability to make improvements. The overall effectiveness has improved this year from inadequate to good. Regular supervision of centre workers, such as the family support workers, has resulted in services and the evaluation of their impact to be of a high quality. However, this has not been the case for all other activities where often evaluation concentrates on user satisfaction rather than the improvement it has made to their lives, or the success of the activity in meeting local priorities. Consequently, the centre demonstrates a satisfactory capacity for improvement.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Increase the participation rate of families and children in centre services and activities.
- Improve the governance and leadership of the centre by:
 - ensuring that the success criteria in the business plan are measurable so that centre leaders can be held to account for their work
 - clarifying and strengthening the role of the partnership board.
- Strengthen evaluation procedures so that:
 - the centre can better demonstrate how its activities are meeting local priorities
 - activities are refined to meet the needs of target groups more successfully
 - the centre is better able to demonstrate clearly the impact of activities on its users.

How good are outcomes for users?

3

The emotional well-being of users is greatly improved by their engagement with the centre. Parents, such as those who have suffered from mental health problems, spoke highly of the support they have received from the centre. As one parent reported, representing the views of other users, 'My own confidence as a parent and as a person has massively increased, and I feel in control more now with regards to my children and my life.'

Users benefit greatly from the well-attended baby clinics, led by the local health services, held on site. One reason for this is because they appreciate the friendly, informal atmosphere that the centre provides, encouraging them to attend regularly. There is an adequate range of healthy activities such as the healthy eating activity that users report has improved their understanding of what constitutes a healthy diet. One parent reported her surprise at how much her family had enjoyed the food she had prepared for them as a result of this course and was determined to continue to provide healthy meals. However, although inspectors observed the high quality of these activities, there are generally fewer users taking advantage than there could be.

Vulnerable children, particularly those with child protection plans, and their families are supported very effectively by the centre and integrated services, such as health, social services, housing and the police. The evaluations show that the lives of these families are greatly improved through the team around the child and the common assessment framework procedures. For example, one parent, who had benefited greatly from the one-to-one support of the centre has learned how to deal with family problems better. He reported that the family was much more secure because the children could trust the behaviour of their parents more.

The stay-and-play activities provide a happy and secure environment for parents and their children to play together. The social skills of these children are developing well, as is the skill of parents in managing behaviour. The outcomes for children in the Wood 'N' Tots Nursery are good. They are well prepared for the next stage in their education. The centre and education partners are improving the impact of services on the children's readiness for formal education in the reach area, but there are still too many who enter school's Early Years Foundation Stage settings who have not benefited from pre-school services.

Users are regularly asked to give their opinions of centre activities and occasionally these are acted upon. For example, earlier this year, the parents' forum was instrumental in suggesting improvements to the use of the coffee area where users meet socially. Leaders report that this facility is now used much more productively to enhance the behaviour of users and their interaction with children. The centre successfully encourages a steady stream of volunteers to support activities, such as in childcare and administration. However, the centre is not yet able to demonstrate that more than a very few go on to make a contribution to the wider community.

The adults spoken to report how much they enjoy the courses they have successfully completed and are very proud of their achievements. Users benefit from a range of courses carefully designed to improve their economic well-being. For example, users had benefited from courses to improve their information, communication and technology, literacy and numeracy skills. There is now a regular stream of users attending the local college in preparation for work and a few have gained full-time employment. Another strong feature of the centre's work is the success they have had with the families referred to them to maximise their income through claiming all

the benefits they are eligible for and by rescheduling debt. However, these services could reach more users. As one reported, 'I would like my friends to have had the same help as I have'.

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	3
The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	3
The extent to which all users enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	3
The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships and users contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	3
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents are developing economic stability and independence including access to training	3

How good is the provision?

3

Assessment procedures are used well by family support workers to encourage families, particularly those that are vulnerable, to request the services that are needed to ensure their safety and well-being. These are then tailored effectively to meet their needs. The centre is also successful at assessing and meeting the needs of users who come to the centre looking for support and advice in bringing up their children and who have now embarked on training to improve their economic well-being. As one parent reported, representing the views of nearly all users, 'The centre has made me very happy about my life and positive about the future.' The effective support of the training and employment coordinator in partnership with the citizens' advice bureau, Jobcentre Plus and the local college has been instrumental to this. The centre successfully nurtures and fosters confidence in users and develops their basic skills so that they are well prepared for training courses and employment. As one user reported, 'It has put me into a position that I thought was impossible, I could not have done this without this service.' The assessment of users' participation in some activities is not yet sufficiently useful in identifying the next steps they could take to further improving their well-being and social and economic contribution. For example, in encouraging users to become volunteers or champions as a result of their successful participation in activities.

The centre has a successful track record at facilitating the effectiveness of services, such as for health. However, the links between different services are not sufficiently integrated so that the centre can demonstrate a concerted approach to achieving improvements to local priorities, such as in the readiness of children for learning. For example, there is not yet a common approach or policy between health and

education services about toileting of children in preparation for Early Years Foundation Stage settings in schools so that a few children start without being toilet trained. The centre and its partners have accurately identified the services that need to be targeted to users such as for teenage parents and to encourage more to breastfeed. However, currently these are too new for the impact on users to be apparent.

All staff provide a welcoming and secure environment in the centre. This starts from first contact with the well-trained reception staff. Some users report that initially they were reluctant to use the centre's services. However, the non-judgemental approach to their needs and the friendly encouragement they encountered quickly overcame their concerns so that they benefit well from the services on offer. Many users also trust the centre staff so much that they report that this is where they come for advice and support on a wide range of issues. As one parent reported, 'The centre staff are always there to support when required. They are very knowledgeable about all aspects of family troubles with children. Easy to talk to and good support.'

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users	3
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all users	3
The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of users and the wider community	3
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?

3

Supervision procedures to check the work of centre staff are satisfactory and for some staff, such as for the family support workers, supervision arrangements are good. A strength of leadership is in creating an environment in the centre that is productive for both service partners and users. There are some examples of good evaluation leading to improvements in services. For example, centre staff identified that there was a group of grandparents who have childcare responsibilities. They were encouraged to form a support group known as the Groovy Grans that has been very successful in providing help and guidance. However, some weaknesses in the evaluation procedures, which results in the value for money being satisfactory, mean that they are not as successful at refining and improving services sufficiently to raise participation rates which would better enable them to achieve local priorities. For example, fathers speak very highly of the Saturday activities with their children. However, in the last year, numbers participating have dwindled. The centre leaders have not done enough to evaluate why this is, so that the decline can be reversed. Recent changes have strengthened the evaluation procedures equipping staff to be more able to tailor services and activities to better meet the

needs of the community, but currently the impact of these is not apparent.

Currently, procedures for health and safety and vetting the suitability of staff are robust. Staff are well trained in the safeguarding procedures for users. A particular strength of the centre is in its safeguarding of families in crisis and experiencing domestic violence. Not only do they ensure that they access the necessary services swiftly but they are very effective advocates for the users who are often unable to articulate their needs.

The centre has successfully ensured the equality of opportunity of all its users and can demonstrate that once they are engaged in its work it leads to improvements to their well-being. This is particularly the case for parents of children with disabilities who speak very highly of the services they receive. However, the centre rightly identifies that while there are still hard-to-reach families that are isolated from services, this results in the equality of access for all the users in the community being limited to satisfactory.

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	3
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of users and the wider community	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 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	3
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

Inspectors looked at the centre's self-evaluation form, data provided by the local authority and the centre, documents and policies, minutes of the partnership board and inspection outcomes for the Wood 'N' Tots Nursery. Discussions were held with the local authority, centre staff, partner agencies and parents.

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance 'Complaining about inspections', which is available from our website: www.ofsted.gov.uk. If you would like us to send you a copy of the guidance, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

Summary for centre users

We inspected the Smith's Wood Children's Centre on 10–11 November 2010. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

We would like to thank those of you who spoke to us. Your views were very helpful to the inspection. We agree with you when you told us how helpful the care, advice and support you receive from the centre and the services are. We think that the range of services and activities on offer is helping you to improve your parenting skills and enabling some of you to train and gain employment. We think that those of you who are experiencing difficulty in your lives are well supported to make your families and children safe and healthy. We also know that the centre has helped some of you who have experienced real difficulties in the past to be much more confident and able to look forward to a brighter future. We watched you thoroughly enjoying the activities, such as 'Stay and Play', where you talked to each other and played with your children. We are very pleased that the Wood 'N' Tots Nursery is giving the children a good start to their education. A few of you have volunteered to help in the centre, but we think that more of you could be encouraged to do so. We agree with one parent who told us that the services available are good, but it is a pity that not enough people in the area are taking advantage of them.

You told us that one reason why you like coming to the centre is because of the well-trained, helpful and friendly staff who work there and we agree. They try their best to help you to make improvements to your lives. For example, the family support workers are doing well. They expertly help you to decide on the services and activities that you need in order to make improvements to family life. They then work well with other agencies like the health service and social services to make sure that the help is just right for you and your family. Some of you were keen to tell us that if you had not received help from the centre that you would not have been able to train or even to consider employment. Some of you wrote about how grateful you were that the staff had helped you to gain the correct benefits and to help you get a house and to manage debt problems. This is because the centre works well with other agencies such as the Citizens' Advice Bureau and Jobcentre Plus. The long-

established health services in the centre, such as the baby clinic, are good at helping you keep your children healthy. The centre is beginning to introduce a number of activities to improve your health, such as the 'Make and Take' activities where you learn how to prepare healthy meals. Those of you who take part are already starting to see the benefits of this. We think that it is really too early to judge how good some new activities are at improving your health.

The local authority is improving the way it governs the children's centres so that 'Action for Children' can demonstrate how it is making the necessary improvements to the lives of families in the community. We think that the business plan does not yet clearly show how they will know when they have been successful. This means that it is difficult for the centre to show how its activities and services are making improvements to the lives of families. The partnership board gives members of the community a useful opportunity to share opinions about what services the centre could provide. However, we do not think that their role is clear, which means that at this time they do not have much of an influence on the centre's work.

The centre leaders have been successful in safeguarding the families that use the centre. They have also been very successful at improving the Wood 'N' Tots Nursery which is now good. They show that they know well the different groups in the community that could benefit from the centre's help. Leaders do not yet check well enough how the activities on offer are leading to improvements, both for you, but also for the community overall.

We have asked the centre to make some improvements by:

- including more families in its activities so that the effect on the well-being of the community is greater than satisfactory overall
- improving the business plan so it is easier to check the improvements being made
- making sure the partnership board's role is clear so that they can have a greater influence on the centre's work
- keeping a better check on their activities so that they can improve them where necessary and also so that they can demonstrate that the activities are fit for purpose in helping the centre meet its targets for improvement.

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