

Inspection report for SA6 St Albans Children's Centre

Local authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	362559
Inspection dates	13–14 October 2010
Reporting inspector	Susan Crawford HMI

Centre governance	Hertfordshire Community Health Service
Centre leader	Teresa Matcham
Date of previous inspection	NA
Centre address	Church Crescent
	St. Albans
	AL3 5JB
Telephone number	01727 891103
Fax number	01727 891102
Email address	Teresa.matcham@hchs.nhs.uk

Linked school if applicable	Muriel Green Nursery School Margaret Wix Primary
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Muriel Green

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.

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

The inspectors held meetings with centre manager, senior management team, representatives of the advisory board, and representatives from Primary Care Trust and the Local Authority, a range of agencies and parents and other users of the centre.

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

Information about the centre

St Albans Children's Centre opened in the autumn of 2001 as an Early Excellence Centre and was awarded Sure Start Children's Centre designation in June 2003. In July 2007 the West Hertfordshire Primary Care Trust (WH PCT) was officially commissioned to deliver the Children's Centre services. The centre is co-located with early years provision and Children's Development Centre. Some activities are held at other sites such as Margaret Wix Primary, Oysterfields and Principal Health Centre. St Alban's Children's Centre is a phase one children's centre which offers the full core offer of services. The centre is in an area where there is vast diversity in terms of language, ethnicity and economic status. There are pockets of high levels of deprivation. It serves the Ashley, Batchwood, and St Peter's wards of St Alban's and is one of the 70% most disadvantaged wards. Although there are some areas where deprivation is high, unemployment in the area that the centre serves is relatively low.

Some children enter the Early Years Foundation Stage with knowledge and skills below those expected for their age. Between them, the onsite local authority Nursery and privately run pre-school provide 151 places. In partnership they provide full day care for children from birth to five years. The pre-school is managed by a private company and has separate early years inspection arrangements. The local authority Nursery was last inspected in November 2008 and was judged outstanding.

Health staff deliver a range of services from the centre including teenage midwifery clinics, health visitor support, breast feeding support, well baby clinic, parenting advice, and specialist support for children with wide range of disabilities including speech and language development, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, an eye service, challenging behaviour psychology service, neonatal hearing clinic and paediatricians. A childminder network meets at the centre. Training is provided for a range of personnel including childminders, schools and the private, voluntary and early years sector.

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

The outcomes for users are good overall with excellent provision for health. This is because of strong centre leadership that has ensured that families, particularly those that are vulnerable, benefit from a range of good quality services that are carefully tailored to meet their particular needs. Procedures for safeguarding are comprehensive and robust. The centre is rightly recognised by users as a place of safety.

Relationships with parents are good and the centre rightly prides itself on the warm welcome it extends to all. Users speak very positively about what the centre provides. Particular strengths are the work of the health visitors, Jobcentre Plus, outreach workers, Hertfordshire Adult Learning Coordinator and the speech and language service for children.

Parents are well represented on the Advisory Board. However there is currently no system to ensure that all members of the board consult with their user group so that each group can truly voice their views to influence and shape the future of the centre. The centre encourages adults to take part and values their evaluations of services, making changes in response to their views. There is an evaluation system in place, consisting of formal questionnaires, parental feedback and verbal feedback. However this is on occasions informal and does not always provide sufficient detail to inform future planning. Users’ views inform practice, as the advisory group are

informed of them and they influence the content of the centre's development plan.

One reason that provision is good is because of the thorough procedures for assessing the needs of users, and in particular the disadvantaged and vulnerable families. These procedures have been successfully established because of the good partnerships between the health visitors, early year's staff, local schools, social care, housing, local councillors, the youth service and other partner agencies that are responsible for users' health, safety and economic well-being.

The centre's self-evaluation is mostly accurate but it is not yet securely based on sufficient up to date local authority data showing the impact of the centre's work on trends over time, such as lone parents or parents on benefit. The centre is able to successfully identify areas of need and shortfalls in provision because of the good quality information that health visitors and midwives provide. This is a strength of the centre and enables them to target groups of people to ensure that their needs are met.

The children's centre demonstrates good capacity for improvement. The leadership of the centre's coordinator is a real strength; she has made significant changes in a relatively short space of time that she has been in post. She demonstrates a passion and relentless determination to improve the life chances of families in the local community. In this she is ably supported by a very strong team that work effectively together and with their partners. The centre knows their reach area well and has a good understanding of any potential barriers.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Build on current evaluation procedures by making more effective use of information available so that the centre is better able to demonstrate its achievements and can identify more specifically how they will judge the success of improvements made.
- Ensure all members on the advisory board provide their representative group with a voice.
- Develop with the local authority the availability of accurate relevant up to date data which is specific to the immediate reach area.

How good are outcomes for users?

2

Health services delivered from the centre, such as the baby clinic, are very effective in ensuring that parents gain excellent advice which is improving their parenting skills. Health services are very well attended; for example, during a two hour session typically 30 to 40 parents and babies are seen.

Health is promoted very well though successful initiatives such as the 'Positive

Beginnings' where parents and carers have access to a wide range of professionals for example health visitors, Home-Start, and speech and language services. These provide excellent advice and support. There is a range of excellent projects available such as 'Baby Massage', 'Baby Yoga' and 'Mums of Steel' that is making a very important contribution to the lives of users in the reach area.

There has been a positive impact on healthy family cooking. The centre developed a six-week course entitled 'Crafty cooking'. This was well attended and evaluations showed the benefits that parents had gained and the marked improvements in their ability to provide their family with healthy options.

The centre is a safe environment and there is good attention to keeping safe. Staff model safe practices well and continually risk assess all activities. For example, there is very good advice given in the baby massage sessions for parents on how to deal with colic. Vulnerable families, for example, those with who have children with special educational needs and/or disabilities are very well supported through procedures and services in the centre. Early intervention and the ability of the centre to respond to individual need has prevented the necessity to action many Common Assessment Framework (CAF) assessments. However staff are trained to complete CAF whenever necessary. Partner agencies, such as Jobcentre Plus regularly use the centre for interviews and meetings because they recognise that families feel safe and secure in this environment.

The speaking and listening skills of children are improving well. The centre, in partnership with the speech therapists, has worked successfully with the private and voluntary sectors to provide training. This enables them to help the children in their provision to improve their communication skills so that they are better prepared for learning when they enter the local nurseries. Partners find the centre very helpful, one stated that the staff are 'incredibly responsive'.

The many adults spoken to report how much they enjoy the courses they have successfully completed and are proud of their achievements. Parents recognise that as their self-confidence and belief grows this has a positive impact on their parenting skills because they enjoy their children more. Children's own confidence is growing as a result of this. The centre celebrates achievements in partnership with the user's own child. They are included in all celebration ceremonies, for example presentation of first aid certificates. Children see their parents receiving certificates and rewards for achievements.

A cross section of users, who are representative of the reach area, now have the confidence to sit on the advisory board. There are a growing number of users that are trained to do voluntary work in the centre. There is also a thriving 'Home-Start' project that is constantly recruiting volunteers and the Muriel Green Nursery School contributes well to recruitment of volunteers too. Good quality training is provided for all and some achieve qualifications to NVQ level.

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	1
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 is effective in assessing the needs of children and families. Assessments cover the whole range of need, including the most vulnerable children and families. The centre has developed good relationships with the statutory, private and voluntary services for children and families. It provides a base for the childminder network to meet that also access the extensive training that is on offer to all that provide a service to children. The centre staff have the respect of these organisations and follow clear processes that put children's and parents' well-being first.

All staff are very aware of the contribution they must make to the work of the centre. For example, well trained administrative staff ensure that all users receive a very warm welcome, because of their awareness of the crucial importance of this first contact.

Observations and the last inspection report identify that childcare within the centre is outstanding and that delivered by its partners in the reach area is mainly good with a number of outstanding providers.

Centre staff match detailed assessments of users' needs with a thorough understanding of different services and agencies so that they effectively target provision to users. Partner agencies recognise that this is a centre strength which enables them to work more effectively with users. For example a multi agency approach is implemented by working in partnership with the health visiting team, Home-Start, probation workers and social care professionals in order to ensure needs are met. Good partnerships with these agencies ensure assessment is robust. This ensures family needs are responded to in an appropriate and timely way.

Adult users of the centre report that the good positive attitude of centre staff to the achievements of users has raised their confidence and self esteem. For example, outreach work at Margaret Wix Primary attracted particular praise.

The centre has good outreach arrangements for supporting families in crisis, such as those provided by the Hertfordshire Adult Learning Co-ordinator (HALC). This results in these families getting swift support from the appropriate agencies so that they are safe.

Due to the constraints of the building, it is difficult for the centre to provide a full range of adult learning from its premises. Strong links with a local college have been established and these provide a wide and varied learning programme. The centre receives support from the Jobcentre Plus advisors, who advise parents on routes to employment and training. Advisors are instrumental in removing barriers for users who wish to access training. A newsletter is sent out each month to all children's centres in Hertfordshire; this provides accessible free information to parents about any changes to benefits and any training that may be available, for example on 'Developing your CV'.

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

One member of the centre staff described the leadership of the coordinator as 'amazing'. This is certainly supported by the opinions of the many users that spoke to inspectors. Staff benefit from the high quality supervision at all levels, which has been successful in established a strong sense of common purpose. All staff feel valued and respect the contribution each makes to improving life chances of users. Consequently, the concerted and effective work of the centre has created a safe, friendly environment where there are high expectations of its users. The centre offers good value for money because of the great care taken to provide services for users that are specifically tailored around their needs. This has enabled the large majority of users to be much safer than they were, and has improved their health and economic well-being.

The centre knows its users very well and can demonstrate its success on an individual and in some instances activity basis because of evaluations by users. It does not have access to all available data to sufficiently demonstrate whether it is more successful than in previous years.

The advisory board is successful in championing the work of the centre to its partners and the local community. This results in the centre’s work being increasingly respected in the reach area. Previously, negative views about the centre presented a barrier to engagement of the local community. The joined up working of the youth worker and local councillor aided the successful renting of additional premises to aid the outreach work of the centre.

Although the advisory board is relative new they are clear about their responsibilities. For example, members understand the centre’s work and the success of the activities that take place. They have contributed and ratified the terms of reference, and are kept fully informed by the centre manager. Members are constantly reviewing their procedures and membership, as they are mindful that the board must be truly representative.

The centre has been successful in breaking down the barriers that vulnerable users experience, thus ensuring the equality of access to services. For example, one user reported that they did not feel safe due to the lay out of the reception area; this was responded to immediately. Furniture was moved around to ensure that it did not encumber wheelchair access, and the user was happy with the outcome.

Safeguarding is given high priority by all staff. Good recording ensures children and families who give cause for concerns are well monitored. Presently all policies and procedures are in place to safeguard users and are reviewed annually. The centre provides a very safe environment that is appreciated by all users and partner agencies. Good security measures and lone working arrangements are in place.

Partnerships are of a high quality because a strong belief in collaborative working is at the heart of the centre’s ethos. All agencies speak highly of the centre and demonstrate a commitment to working together.

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 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	2
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	2

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

NA

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 St Alban's Children's Centre on 13–14 October 2010. We judged the centre as good.

The strong centre leadership of the coordinator and her dedicated team have provided families with a range of good quality services that are carefully tailored to meet their particular needs. People that use the centre are now much more able to stay safe and healthy and to provide for their families. Those of you we spoke to were particularly proud of your achievements. These ranged from becoming better parents to gaining voluntary work or full-time training because of the skills you learned at the centre. The children that use the centre are also well catered for. This means that they settle well into the local nurseries and make better progress than they would if they had not benefitted from the centre's services.

Those of you we spoke to told us that you think that the centre is a safe place for you and your children. Inspectors agreed with this view and found that staff work very well to ensure the health and safety of all who use the centre. The centre is also good at helping children in need to be safe by working well with other agencies such as the health service and social services.

The care, guidance and support that families and children receive are good, particularly from organisations such as Jobcentre Plus. You told us that coming to the centre or the outreach centre had increased your confidence and self-esteem. This is because the staff are excellent at helping all parents to decide how to improve their lives and then making sure that they access the right services to do this. You also told us that you appreciated the warm, friendly atmosphere in the centre and the fact that there is always someone to help when you need advice. Parents who have felt isolated and alone with their problems have made friends as a result of the centre's work and outreach team.

The centre staff and their partner agencies, particularly health, have provided you and your families with a good range of varied services that cater for all needs. For example, 'Positive Beginnings' and the 'Diversity Group'. The services for children are also good, such as the Muriel Green Nursery School, where they thrive.

The centre is governed by an advisory board that has successfully raised the profile of the centre in the community. It could do more to check that all parents and other members in the reach area are having their views heard.

The centre coordinator and other senior staff understand the needs of you and your families very well and they check regularly that their workers are doing a good job. They are well aware of where they could make more improvements, but do not always have information from the local authority to ensure that they can show that they are making a difference. Also they need the help of all users to complete regular evaluations so that they can use this to inform their planning.

We have asked the centre to make some improvements by:

- providing more opportunities for all to contribute to the centre's work and have a voice at the advisory board
- gaining better data from the local authority
- being better at evaluating the work of the centre.

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