

Inspection report for Smethwick Uplands and Londonderry Sure Start Children's Centre

Local authority	Sandwell
Inspection number	365844
Inspection dates	25–26 January 2011
Reporting inspector	Susan Walsh

Centre governance	Primary Care Trust
Centre leader	Lynn Bates
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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Linked school if applicable	Uplands Manor Primary School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Sure Tots Manor 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 registered early years was carried out on 13 December 2010 under Section 3 of the Childcare Act 2006. The report of this inspection is available on our website www.ofsted.gov.uk.

This inspection was carried out by two additional inspectors.

The inspectors held meetings with the interim head of centre, other senior leaders and a range of staff, plus members of the partnership advisory board, parents, carers and users of the centre and a representative from the local authority. They observed the centre's work and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

Smethwick Uplands and Londonderry Sure Start Children's Centre is a phase one children's centre which opened in July 2006. It is located within an annex of Uplands Manor Primary School. The head of the centre was appointed to an interim position in April 2009. Although the Primary Care Trust has overarching responsibility for the centre, the local authority also monitors the quality of provision. The centre receives the advice and guidance of a partnership board which performs the same function as a management advisory board. At the end of March 2011, the local authority will temporarily take over responsibility for the centre while all the children's centre services in the local authority are subject to a tendering process. The interim head of the centre is leaving in April 2011 and another senior leader is also departing. The local authority is considering options for the future leadership of the centre.

The children's centre provides a range of integrated services including health, family support, links to return to education and employment, and early years' advice and guidance. Some of the centre's services take place at different locations within the centre's reach area. The school also supports three local primary schools and three private day-care settings.

Families come from a wide range of ethnic heritages, but the majority are from White British or Asian heritages. The proportion of families from Asian heritages is increasing. Much of the catchment lies in areas of significant deprivation where incomes are low and there are significant problems relating to health. Most children's development on entry to Early Years Foundation Stage provision is well below the levels expected for their age.

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

Smethwick Uplands and Londonderry Sure Start Children's Centre provides a good service for the young children, parents, carers and families who live within or just beyond its reach area. The interim leader has done a sterling job and has ensured that the centre has established good-quality provision after going through a very challenging period. New good-quality staff have been recruited, a wider range of activities has been made available and the centre is now able to make provision for more families in the reach area and offer them good-quality care, guidance and support. There is a strong commitment to ensuring the safety and protection of children and all who use the centre.

The centre has a good understanding of its local community. This stems from the good use of data provided by the local authority and good communication with other professionals, which enables the centre to ensure good equality of opportunity for the diverse range of needs within the reach area. Families with additional needs are recognised and the centre offers courses and activities that meet the most pressing needs within the reach area. The range of services that is offered is good and results in good outcomes as families deepen their understanding of how to live healthy lifestyles, keep themselves safe and develop essential skills for employment or the next stage of education. The centre has contributed to recent improvements to the number of mothers who initiate and sustain breastfeeding. However breastfeeding rates are still relatively low. Limited contact with antenatal care providers makes it difficult for the centre to offer support at the most crucial times in order to successfully encourage breastfeeding by new mothers.

The centre is effective in raising levels of attainment for young children, particularly in enhancing their social skills and improving children's communication skills. Children greatly enjoy their time at the centre, they are learning to do exciting things and make new discoveries. Close partnerships with linked primary schools have been very successful because they have been tightly focused on improving outcomes for children and families. Children's progress is carefully tracked and data has been used well to identify the areas where children's progress has been relatively slow. Effective action has been taken to assist children to make better progress, including extensive

work to help parents to appreciate how they can support their children. Consequently, there has been a recognisable reduction in the number of children in the locality whose attainment is particularly low at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage. Good partnerships with the speech and language service have also helped in this respect because children whose speech and language development is delayed are now identified more promptly than before and can be offered appropriate support at an earlier age. Although there are many examples of effective partnership, the centre is aware that improvement is required in the way the centre works in partnership with local childminders to help them develop their practice.

Parents, carers and families appreciate the good-quality support and advice they receive. They especially value facilities such as 'Stay and Play', swimming and 'Baby Club' which help them to make new friends as well as assist them to support their children's development. Although these activities are well attended, attendance at other activities is more uneven. Parents report that newsletters have become more infrequent and they are right to be concerned that modern technology is underused as a means of communication. As a result, parents and carers are not always made fully aware of all the centre is able to offer. Nevertheless, when parents and families attend activities they are very appreciative of the opportunity to mix with others. Users say, 'It's great to meet other parents and make friends.' Groups that attend the centre are from a wide variety of backgrounds and all work harmoniously together contributing well to community cohesion.

Although some of the key personnel who have made a considerable contribution to developing good-quality provision are leaving the centre soon, they have continued to put their considerable energies into sustaining improvements. Those senior managers who will remain also have maintained their committed to the centre. This resolve is shared with other staff who show a high degree of professionalism and determination. Therefore, the centre's capacity for sustained improvement is good. Nevertheless, staff morale would benefit from addressing the unsettling uncertainties that surround plans for the future leadership and management of the centre.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Further develop strategies to encourage the initiation and sustaining of breastfeeding, including working with a wider range of agencies to develop more timely support and intervention.
- Enhance the way the centre works with childminders, including the way it helps childminders to develop their practice.
- Improve communication with parents and carers, especially regarding the timing of events and activities, through providing more regular newsletters and using modern technology more effectively.
- As a matter of urgency, clarify the way the centre is to be managed in the near future.

How good are outcomes for users?

2

Increasing numbers of users are accessing the services provided by the centre. Take-up rates are particularly high for the 'Play and Stay' sessions that are held in satellite centres in the local community, swimming and baby club. High-quality personal support for families makes a good contribution to the emotional health of parents, carers and children. Baby club, baby massage and other programmes also help parents understand their children's emotional needs. Activities such as swimming successfully promote enjoyment of exercise as well as camaraderie and well-being. Relatively few children who join the Reception Year are obese, and obesity figures for children in the area are decreasing, illustrating the success of the centre's health education programme. Rates of breastfeeding, although improving, are low. The centre makes contact with mothers six weeks after they have given birth so they do not always have the opportunity to offer help and support when mothers need it most.

The good opportunities for parents to develop their understanding of health and safety issues are having a positive impact on improving outcomes for children and their families. There is a good emphasis on helping children and parents to be aware of how to keep themselves and their families safe. Early intervention by the centre's family support workers means that families are quickly made aware of the potential hazards in the home, and safety equipment is regularly loaned to parents and carers. Incidents of harm to children are decreasing in the locality because of good identification of vulnerable families and the provision of good-quality individual support. This includes working to support children who have child protection plans and supporting those children who are subject to the Common Assessment Framework. The centre possesses a good number of case studies which show how well individual families have made progress in their personal and social development, acquired skills for the future or improved their economic stability or independence. Some of the most poignant cases show how the centre has helped those whose circumstances have been particularly challenging to improve their situation. Many families in the area struggle to make ends meet, and the welfare benefits officer successfully supports parents to access benefits.

Children make good progress in all areas of their learning when they attend the centre's provision and demonstrate good behaviour and good relationships. They grow quickly in confidence and make good progress in improving their speaking and listening skills. There is warm rapport between staff and those who use the centre. Parents and carers play an important part in the life of the centre, for example, they act as volunteers during the 'Play and Stay' sessions and some have been enabled to study for childcare qualifications. There is an active parents' group who have been able to contribute to fundraising for national charities and who would like to do more to support other parents.

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	2
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 local authority provides the centre with high-quality data which is used appropriately to assess local needs. This detailed data helps the centre have a good understanding of ethnicity and an awareness of the changing nature of the local population. All families with newborn babies are visited six weeks after they return from hospital, and registration at the centre is encouraged. Potentially vulnerable families are identified and receive individual support that often involves eliciting the support of other agencies and local charities in developing a whole package of care. Additionally, parents are offered very good quality support in times of crisis.

The activities provided in the centre are of good quality and promote purposeful learning, enjoyment and development. The centre has developed a sensory room which is well used by local children who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. There is good support for initiatives in the locality such as taking over the running of the toy library at the local library when it faced closure. Those activities that are provided out in the community are particularly well attended. Additionally, visits further afield are very popular. Centre users report that these visits to places, such as Wonderland in Telford, are highly enjoyable, adding that they are like 'a big family party'. Occasionally, activities are not as successful, for example, a significant amount of energy was put into organising 'Toddle in the Park' but no parents attended. The 'Fab Tots' programme employs the expertise of health workers and offers parents high-quality information about nutrition.

The centre is successful in signposting users to advice, in making referrals to other education and training providers and in providing support for ways back into employment. Currently, the centre does not provide a course for parents wanting to learn English as an additional language. However, it did recognise that the session labelled 'bilingual' was not sufficiently focused on developing spoken English for parents and children and has made the necessary improvements. The centre has also tried to respond to the needs of working parents and fathers by running sessions at weekends and in the evenings. However, the response from users has been mixed.

This may reflect inconsistencies in the way the centre communicates with its users.

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

The interim leader has in a short time developed an enthusiastic and talented team that delivers a good-quality service. Leaders at all levels know the strengths and weaknesses of their services and have sensible plans for improvement. There are clear lines of accountability. Although the Primary Care Trust has ultimate responsibility for the centre, the local authority also thoroughly monitors the centre's performance and provides clear targets for improvement. Additionally, the head of the centre has frequent contact with heads of neighbouring children's centres, including those that are run by the local authority. The partnership board is well acquainted with the needs of the locality and the work of the centre and is, therefore, able to hold the centre to account. Regular meetings help to ensure that the board contributes well to planning future developments. The centre uses data well to evaluate its work, particularly regarding the impact of its Early Years Foundation Stage work in promoting children's achievement. Additionally, every activity is evaluated using a common format, although not all the forms are completed with equal thoroughness. Currently, the centre is not doing enough to monitor, evaluate and ultimately support the work of childminders.

Partnerships are pivotal to the centre's good work. In addition to very good partnerships with local primary schools and private nursery providers, there are good links with parents and users and local charities which all contribute to improving the quality of life for children and their families. Partnerships with health professions, including midwives and health visitors, are not as strong. Health visitors are good at referring potentially vulnerable families but are not often present in the centre. This is said to reflect local shortages of health visitors and patterns of deployment which focus on those who have the most pressing needs.

The centre has a diligent approach to safeguarding. All staff and volunteers have their backgrounds and identities carefully checked. Staff training is thorough and staff are highly sensitive to child protection issues. This includes working effectively in partnership with other agencies, including those agencies that address issues of

domestic violence, in order to ensure that children are well protected. The centre offers good value for money because it tailors its service around its users' needs. It successfully promotes equality and diversity. The inclusion of all children and families is central to its work, and outcomes for different groups are carefully monitored and evaluated. Although the centre has developed well, uncertainties about the future of the centre have been unsettling for staff and have contributed to staff turnover.

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

The outcomes for children who attend the day-care provision housed within the centre were not inspected. However, information about outcomes was taken from the recent inspection report.

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 Smethwick Uplands and Londonderry Sure Start Children's Centre on 25–26 January 2011. We judged the centre as good overall.

We would like to thank all the people who spoke to us when we visited the centre. Many of you told us what you thought about the centre and its activities. Your views were very helpful.

The children's centre provides a good range of services that are helping children and their families in Uplands and Londonderry. Throughout the inspection, those of you we met were keen to tell us how you and your children have benefited from activities like 'Stay and Play' and 'Baby Club'. You said it had helped your children's confidence and language development as well as providing you with opportunities to make new friends. We were also impressed by the case studies which showed how the lives of many families have been improved through links with the centre. Lots of activities are well attended, but sometimes interesting activities are arranged and relatively few families attend. You told us that this may be because you are getting fewer newsletters and we also noticed that the centre does not have a website and does not use e mail or text to get in touch with users. So we have asked the centre to improve the way it communicates with you.

The centre works well with most of its partners. Its work with local primary schools and private day-care settings is helping children to really improve their personal development and communication skills. You told us that you very much appreciate the opportunity to mix with other families from a wide range of backgrounds and enjoy the mix of people from different minority ethnic groups. The centre is good at providing opportunities for you to volunteer and at helping you to develop the skills that will help you find jobs in the future. Although the centre works well with many partners, it is not doing enough to ensure that local childminder services are provided with help and support when needed.

We noticed that the centre was good at helping you to keep fit and healthy. Although rates for breastfeeding are improving they are still low in your area. As a result, we have asked the centre to work with other professionals to ensure that new mothers get timely support and encouragement both to start and to continue breastfeeding.

The leaders and managers at the centre have done a sterling job and ensured that the centre has hugely improved in recent years. By the time this report is published, a long-serving senior manager will have left the centre and the interim leader will be about to leave. It is not clear who will lead the centre in the future. Obviously, this is unsettling for staff and needs to be resolved.

Thank you again for the time you took to come and speak to us. It is clear from these conversations and the written comments you have made on the

centre's evaluation sheets that users have positive views about the children's centre.

We wish you well for the future.

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