

Inspection report for Alumwell Pleck Sure Start Children's Centre

Local authority	Walsall
Inspection number	362426
Inspection dates	8–9 December 2010
Reporting inspector	Rajinder Harrison

Centre governance	Local Authority
Centre leader	John Hood
Date of previous inspection	Not inspected previously
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Linked school if applicable	N/A
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Alumwell Pleck Sure Start 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.

This inspection was carried out by two additional inspectors.

The inspectors held meetings with the acting centre manager, members of the advisory group, a range of providers, parents and carers, users and the local authority officers linked to the centre. Inspectors observed the centre's work, and looked at sessions in operation at the centre and other sites. They also looked at relevant documentation including the centre's operational plans, self-evaluations, key policies and safeguarding procedures.

Information about the centre

Alumwell Pleck Sure Start Children's Centre is a Phase 1 centre designated in 2006 and is located in an area that serves the two communities of Alumwell and Pleck in the Walsall's city centre. The centre offers most of its services from the purpose-built premises but also uses various venues in partnership with other service providers. The area served by the centre is socially mixed and highly populated. A high number of properties are council owned. Much of the area is in the lowest 10 per cent of most deprived areas of the country. An above average proportion of families claim benefits as the incidence of worklessness is higher than the national average. While around 40 per cent of families are of White British heritage, the majority represent a wide range of ethnic minority backgrounds, the largest groups being Pakistani and Indian families. A significant number of families migrate into the area from Asia, Africa and Eastern European countries and are new to speaking English. A high proportion of children from the reach area enter school with skills well below those expected for their age. Within the area the centre serves, there are significant issues surrounding extreme poverty, unemployment, poor health, crime, alcohol and substance misuse and low levels of literacy and numeracy.

The centre is one that the local authority has commissioned the local NHS Trust to run on its behalf. Governance arrangements are with the commissioned body and the advisory board which has representatives from a wide range of agencies in the local community. The centre is currently managed by an acting centre manager while

the permanent centre manager is absent. The centre offers a range of health, social care, and family support services. Childcare is provided through the on-site nursery that takes children aged from 0 to 5 years and regular crèche sessions held at the centre. The childcare provision has not yet been inspected by Ofsted.

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

Alumwell Pleck Sure Start Children's Centre provides a warm, friendly and safe environment for all its users. They are very appreciative of the work it does and value the positive impact this has on their lives. A typical view expressed by a user is, 'The centre is like coming home but better – I feel safe and respected here. Staff are brilliant because they don't judge you. They care about everyone, no matter what.'

A key strength is the good leadership provided by the acting centre manager and excellent teamwork among staff. Leaders model good practice and set high standards for others to follow. Safeguarding procedures are good and staff work hard to foster harmonious relations between the rich diversity reflected within the local community and among centre users. Everyone, irrespective of background, ability and need is made to feel extremely welcome and valued. The multi-agency advisory group and the local authority lend their expertise and support, and continually challenge the centre to provide better outcomes for all users. While users are regularly asked, via discussions and evaluations, for their views regarding the activities the centre offers, they are not involved enough in decision making to influence or determine the priorities for the services the centre provides.

Over the last year, the centre has increased the number of users it reaches to the extent that many sessions, such as 'Stay and Play' are oversubscribed. Consequently, some provision is located in other venues. It has been particularly successful with those who are hard to reach, with a notable rise in the numbers of fathers, young parents and children under five using the centre on a regular basis. This is largely due to a concerted effort by all staff to promote the centre's services and the benefits to local families, particularly through home visits and referrals from partner service providers. Users consider the centre as a 'good place to go for help and advice, to learn and to make friends'. The increased usage of the centre's facilities is

causing some difficulties; for example, users sometimes have to wait for crèche places to become available so they can attend activities such as learning English. Staff manage such demand fairly and offer alternative provision wherever possible.

The outcomes for users are good because provision is good. It is strongest when the centre uses the expertise of professionals, for example, from health and education, to influence its work in order to help families become more independent and self-reliant. Information exchange between services is effectively managed to support individuals and families and to safeguard outcomes for all, particularly the most vulnerable. Assessments to elicit the needs of individuals are conducted very sensitively so that parents and children have the specific help they need to make good progress in their learning and personal development. Information from course evaluations and other data are used well to modify provision. Information from providers is readily forthcoming because partnership working is exceptionally well embedded, and centre staff analyse the information they gather effectively to identify development priorities. Plans accurately reflect the changing profile as the number of users increases. The centre has met and exceeded a number of its targets this year, including lowering obesity levels in the community. While aspects of promoting healthy lifestyles, for example breastfeeding, are tackled very effectively, users indicate that they want to learn more about healthy cooking and keeping fit.

Action to overcome gaps in provision and improve outcomes is effective. Leaders respond quickly to address any areas identified as weaknesses and ensure that all providers are kept fully informed. Leaders are accurate in their self-evaluation and acknowledge that while the centre is working to capacity, a small number of hard-to-reach families are not participating fully. The local authority and the advisory board provide a robust quality assurance role. This provides the centre with good capacity to build on these successes and further improve outcomes for families and children.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Do more to help users maintain healthy lifestyles by:
 - increasing opportunities for parents to learn how to prepare healthy meals
 - offering more opportunities for users to undertake exercise regularly.
- Involve parents and carers more in decision making by:
 - recruiting representation on to the advisory board
 - raising the profile of the Parents' Forum in management of the centre's work.

How good are outcomes for users?

2

The centre addresses users' feelings of isolation very effectively. Typical comments from many users include, 'I couldn't have managed without help from the centre staff when I suffered from depression and nobody had the time to listen. I know my children would have really suffered if they hadn't helped me here,' and 'I have made life-long friends here. We help each other. I can discuss problems without fear. Staff listen and help sort things – they saved my life.' The activities and individual support provide very good opportunities for families to develop strong friendships and a

sense of belonging and self-worth. Many report that their confidence and self-esteem have improved as a result and that they feel they can tackle problems more easily. Activities the centre offers are well attended and generate a lively atmosphere where parents and children feel safe and relaxed and have fun learning together. All who attend, from a variety of backgrounds, work and play together harmoniously and staff encourage friendships that flourish beyond the centre.

High quality information and practical advice to all families helps to improve, for example, their parenting skills so that they can support their children's development more effectively. Parents report that they develop a better understanding of early years education through the many family learning activities, such as the 'Share a Story' and 'Tots and Toddlers'. They report that staff helpfully signpost families to appropriate services, for example debt counselling, to improve their lives. Family workers conduct home visits and identify relevant agencies, such as health visitors, to advise and support users, especially the most vulnerable. High attendance at activities indicates their popularity and usefulness. The breastfeeding group successfully encourages mothers to persevere with breastfeeding because they understand the health benefits for their babies. Children with disabilities are supported well and specialist staff work with family workers to ensure positive outcomes for parents and the children. For example, respite support is available in the nursery or crèche to allow parents time away from their care duties. While education regarding healthy eating has resulted in obesity levels falling in the area, centre users highlight a need to learn more about cooking healthy low budget meals and how to keep fit. Health workers successfully raise awareness about the dangers of smoking through pregnancy, but the overall number of adults who smoke remains high because smoking cessation has not been high priority.

Relationships between staff and families are very trusting. This allows staff to identify quickly and sensitively any safety concerns and intervene appropriately before a crisis occurs. Services offered in the centre ensure users are safe and resources such as free home safety packs aid safety at home. Regular sessions on home and road safety remind parents of everyday hazards and as a result, emergency admissions to hospital have declined in the last year. A good parenting course has helped parents secure better relationships, behaviour and home safety for their children and helped some users curb their stress and distress, to ease flashpoints when problems arise.

Children are very well prepared for school through the effective provision for the Early Years Foundation Stage and the 'Lively Ladybirds' support just prior to starting nursery school. High quality learning experiences impact very positively on children's learning and development. Emphasis is placed on improving children's speaking and listening skills, with children as young as nine months sitting with parents to hear stories and explore books. Regular consultation with speech therapists, identifies early any children who need additional support in this area. Children have fun socialising with others, and play and explore independently, using paint, glue, building bricks and other high quality resources. They make very good progress in their personal development by interacting with others and by learning good personal hygiene and eating habits. Children who use the centre settle in school more quickly than others and make rapid progress. Very good educational courses, including some

that are accredited, result in high success rates for adults in skills such as literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology. Most attend regularly because they are keen to improve their employment chances. Many progress to further education and training opportunities, for example in childcare, school support staff and foundation degree courses. Users benefit from the centre's very effective partnership with the 'New Horizons' project that promotes high aspirations for economic success. Those new to learning English make rapid gains and progress to more advanced classes elsewhere. As a result, many users develop relevant skills and qualifications to equip them for the world of work and improve their life chances.

Behaviour is very good. Staff successfully promote a sense of belonging and mutual respect between staff and users. All parties enjoy being there. Play sessions successfully engage parents by involving them in befriending newcomers. Parents are encouraged to suggest ideas for future activities and the 'Dads' group has successfully organised a number of activities on Saturdays and at other times. While the centre has not yet made inroads to recruit parents to the advisory group, the parents' forum has recently re-formed to represent users' views.

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	1
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	1

How good is the provision?

2

Outreach services are very effective in meeting the needs of families. Triggered by referrals through various service providers or self-referrals, home visits are high priority, particularly for vulnerable families facing significant crisis. Outcomes following visits are monitored well and excellent partnerships with other providers ensure support is prompt and effective to safeguard children and their families, particularly the most vulnerable. Families where a member's disability limits their capacity to access the centre, receive additional support, often involving providers such as the Portage service and childcare so that individual needs are identified early and met well. Support for the many families of minority ethnic origin takes account of any language needs and staff signpost services, for example welfare benefits and, if appropriate, courses in English as an additional language. Links with the local

library extend provision through, for example, school holiday clubs for children and their families. Partnerships with social care are very good. As a consequence, family workers coordinate well with care workers to support families in crisis. Extensive work with housing associations ensures children are safe, warm and well looked after, particularly where families face considerable financial hardship. When emergencies arise, centre staff respond quickly and tailor support to meet individual needs. This personalised support is a strength that users value. While partnership working overall is outstanding, the centre's links with local childminders are not as robust.

Sessions and courses provide high quality purposeful learning. For example, the 'Baby Clinic' and 'Share a Story' groups and the crèche facilities provide stimulating opportunities for parents and their babies and young children to enjoy quality time together. The children explore in a safe, nurturing environment; parents receive good quality advice and support from a range of professionals and have valuable time to share experiences with each other and make friends.

Users understand that attending activities at the centre helps improve their lives and benefits their children. While not all take up formal education courses, many attend the various childcare and parenting courses regularly and engage enthusiastically in activities that help them support their children's learning and development. For example, 'Weaning Party' offers important guidance on how best to introduce babies to healthy food. Attendance is very good and many return regularly in order to maintain good habits. While the centre offers very effective guidance on promoting healthy lifestyles, parents say that in order to maintain good habits, they need more guidance on how to cook healthy low budget meals and exercise regularly.

The centre assesses and reviews users' needs very effectively and asks individuals, groups and providers as to where to target further provision. Signposting or referral to services and courses is swift and effective. Sustaining long-term benefits for users is a priority, so skills are developed well through courses such as the computer and English classes that promote confidence and self-esteem. Individuals requesting specific guidance receive this promptly, and this may include attending other centres in the area. In 'Parents and Toddlers' sessions, assessments effectively focus on children's needs and ensure activities are interesting and relevant to their lives. For example, children make fruit kebabs and enjoy 'temptingly tasty' results. Parents are shown how they can record their child's success through notes and photographs.

The quality of care for users and their children is good. Support for users' well-being is high priority and families report that their lives are better for having had the help they needed, particularly at low points in their lives. The family workers at the centre have had to respond swiftly on occasions but have done so in a very professional but sensitive manner and this has resulted in positive outcomes that effectively support community cohesion. While overall care arrangements for children aged 0 to 2 years are very good, space for sleeping is limited and no provision is made for the removal of outdoor shoes to safeguard floor areas where babies play.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users	1
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all users	1
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 leadership team has an accurate view of the quality of provision and where improvements need to be made. Staff are supervised well and effectively supported to improve their practice through robust performance management procedures and high quality professional development opportunities. Users who attend activities are encouraged to express their views regarding provision and this influences changes. Not enough is being done to involve representatives of users in strategic planning.

Governance is good because the advisory group and the local authority have a very clear understanding of the issues facing the local community and hold centre staff accountable for delivering the services that match the needs of children and their families. They ensure that all staff implement stringent checks to secure the safety of children and their families and that every precaution is taken where there are concerns, particularly regarding child protection. Effective communication channels ensure concerns are addressed promptly. Leaders ensure that the centre's development plan addresses local and national priorities well and is based on analysis of regional data and information. Data is analysed thoroughly and staff have a very good overview of outcomes for parents and children. Staff set targets that are the most urgent to meet family needs. The very careful assessments regarding the progress of young children as they move through the Early Years Foundation Stage show that children who take up the support the centre offers benefit immensely when they start school. Leaders review the centre's progress regularly with the local authority and set further targets.

Equality and diversity are promoted exceptionally well. Everyone who attends is integrated well, every referral is followed up promptly and every affordable support given to vulnerable families. Any family experiencing exceptional hardship, for example with respect to debt, receives support to cope with legal issues and plan spending more effectively. New migrants are welcomed into the area and immediate needs identified quickly to help families settle and register with service providers, including schools. Those new to English are encouraged to enrol in classes at the centre and meet other students in a similar situation.

The leaders have a reflective approach to working and continually look for new ways

to reach into the local community and include all groups of users effectively. For example, fathers are effectively encouraged to attend the centre to improve their relationships with their children and families; this group has flourished in the last year. Home visits, leafleting and an effective children's centre network in the town help users go further afield to extend their opportunities. Leaders ensure a wide variety of users and community groups make good use of the facilities, but more needs to be done to elicit the needs of the few hard-to-reach families who do not engage with the centre yet. All the safeguarding and child protection procedures are robust and all centre staff implement stringent checks to secure the safety of children and their families. The centre offers good value for money.

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	1
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	1
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

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Alumwell Pleck Sure Start Children's Centre on 8–9 December 2010. We visited a number of activities, looked at the centre's plans and documents

and had discussions with some of you and the staff that work there. Thank you to everyone who took the time to speak with us; we are very grateful. Following this visit, we have judged that all aspects of the centre's work are good and some are outstanding. The centre provides good support to you and your families.

The centre provides a good range of services that are helping you to improve your lives. You appreciate the positive approach of all staff and were eager to explain how the centre has transformed the lives of some families successfully. It was particularly good to hear that you regard the centre as a safe and welcoming place to be, and that you make good friends there. The numbers of families using the centre are rising but there are still a few not benefitting from the good provision on offer.

The centre works exceptionally well with a range of partners such as social care, early years education, the health service and the library. It provides excellent support for your children, so that they have a very good start in life. 'Tots and Toddlers', 'Share a Story' and the breastfeeding groups are popular and provide excellent opportunities for parents and children to play and learn together. As a result, your families have benefitted through improved relationships and better understanding of how to stay safe, fit and healthy. Many parents benefit from various parenting sessions and numerous high quality education and training courses to increase their employment prospects. Providers work very closely with the centre to offer the best service possible. While you have a good understanding of how to ensure your children are healthy, a number of you say you would like to learn to cook healthy meals and the centre could do more to encourage regular exercise for you and your children.

The centre manager and all staff work very closely with other service providers to support you. The local authority and the advisory board maintain a good overview of the centre's work. Centre staff are supported well by these groups to ensure that they do their best to improve outcomes for all families. While staff regularly ask you to evaluate the activities you attend, parents are not involved in making decisions about how the centre's work should develop to meet the needs of more families.

We have made the following recommendations to help improve the centre.

- To help you lead healthier lives, increase opportunities for you to learn to prepare healthy meals and do more to encourage you and your children to take regular exercise.
- In order to improve services, involve you in decision making through the advisory board and day-to-day centre management through the Parents' Forum

We wish you every success for the future.

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