

Inspection report for SA8 The Alban Way Children's Centre

Local authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	365840
Inspection dates	9–10 June 2011
Reporting inspector	Jackie Cousins

Centre governance	Hertfordshire Local Authority
Centre leader	Lorraine Imber
Date of previous inspection	N/A
Centre address	Fleetville Junior School
	228 Hatfield Road, St Albans
	AL1 4LW
Telephone number	01727 855134
Fax number	01727 811541
Email address	manager.albanway@hertschildrenscentres.org.uk

Linked school if applicable	Fleetville Infant and Nursery School 117138, Fleetville Junior School 117137
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	N/A

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 an additional inspector and an early years Inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the children's centre manager, coordinator, seven outreach workers including two with responsibility for the black and minority ethnic community or those with additional needs, the headteachers of Fleetville Infant and Nursery School and Fleetville Junior School, the manager of the Little Stars Pre-School, the health visiting and school nurse team leader, the manager of the St Alban's and Hertsmere Women's Refuge, the childminder representative, the teenage pregnancy midwife, two groups of parents and carers, several members of the advisory board and one representative of the local authority. The inspectors observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

The Alban Way Children's Centre is situated in a mixed neighbourhood with a few significant areas of disadvantage. This centre covers urban and rural areas, attracting a diverse range of families to the centre. The large majority of families who live in the surrounding area are from White British backgrounds. A significant number of families are from Asian and African families or from Western and Eastern European groups. A few are at the early stages of learning to speak English. The area around the centre has considerable levels of unemployment, families receiving benefits and workless households.

The centre was designated and opened in November 2007. It operates from two rooms in Fleetville Junior School and other activities take place at various community venues within the centre's area. Since then, it has operated as an integrated centre. In partnership with Fleetville Infant and Nursery School, it is able to provide the full 'core' offer because it provides health services and coordinates information about early education and childcare. Most children enter early education with skills that are in line with those expected for their age.

It is led by the centre manager who is supported by the centre coordinator and the headteacher of Fleetville Infant and Nursery School oversees their work. The advisory board is comprised of representatives from the lead agency, early years providers, parents, health providers, staff from the centre and a number of neighbourhood partners.

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 Alban Way Children's Centre offers children and families good support. The centre manager and all staff make sure all users, wherever they originate from, are included well into centre activities. One parent summed up the thoughts of others when they said, 'As a new mother, knowing that there is a support network at the centre has been a huge benefit to how I feel and manage my family.'

The key to the centre's success is that it places a high priority on promoting users' self-esteem. Many parents and carers say that the centre thoughtfully develops their self-confidence as well as their children's. This is because staff guide them positively and astutely. Parents and carers very much value the way that their individual needs are met due to the high level of care offered by all staff. For example, one parent typically commented, 'The information and guidance you receive from the staff are fantastic and I recommend the centre highly.' In a recent survey, users strongly agreed that centre staff were very approachable and non-judgemental. Evidence from case studies indicates that families have received excellent support in times of crisis because of wise referrals made by staff. High-quality support and parenting courses mean that many parents and carers learn about the best ways to manage challenges that their families face. For example, a session led by centre staff enabled adult users to discuss their feelings so that they could develop positive ways of working with their children. Parents and carers feel safe at the centre and say that it is a secure environment for their children. This is because safeguarding is given a high level of importance.

The centre places a strong emphasis on learning through practical activities. Users

and their children thoroughly enjoy coming to the centre and taking part in many fascinating activities such as baby massage sessions. Healthy lifestyles are adopted successfully and users' personal well-being is supported exceptionally thoughtfully because of staff expertise. Parents, carers and children take part effectively in 'Stay and Play' sessions where they learn to explore the world around them. For example, they investigate how dough can be shaped imaginatively. Users enjoy 'Rhyme Time' sessions where they learn to communicate and sing songs productively. The children in the Early Years Foundation Stage who attend the centre enhance their personal, social and emotional development effectively. They behave well at the centre. The crèche plans sessions efficiently for children at different stages of development. This is because they are assessed carefully by staff. However, the recording of children's and adult users' achievements are not always noted in full. This means that it is not easy to track the amount of progress that they make and the centre cannot evaluate in detail its impact on all users.

The centre manager and the advisory board are clear about the strengths and areas of development throughout the centre's provision. The centre manager and coordinator inspire and lead the centre well. All staff work well as a team and use self-evaluation carefully to drive improvements. Developments include the provision of first aid courses at the centre which mean that 249 users have successfully learnt how to save children and young babies lives. Numbers of mothers who continue to breastfeed their baby for six to eight weeks have increased significantly. The proportion of adult users who are new to the country and cannot speak English fluently has reduced considerably. This is due to the fact that outstanding partnerships mean users have successfully completed English language courses. The centre meets its statutory responsibilities for the promotion of equality and diversity well. It has been particularly effective in supporting users who have children with additional needs. Occasionally, children's key skills are not well promoted in the open air because outside areas are not always resourced or used effectively. This means that a few children do not have valuable opportunities to develop, for example, their literacy skills successfully in outside areas. Good provision and outcomes, together with great improvements demonstrate the centre's good capacity for continued improvement.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Make sure that users' and children's progress is tracked in detail so that the centre measures its impact more effectively.
- Improve the centre's use of outside learning areas so that key skills of literacy are promoted more successfully.

How good are outcomes for users?

2

Healthy lifestyles are developed well at the centre; for example, users learn successfully about the importance of taking regular exercise because they enjoy baby

yoga sessions. Children are encouraged to try healthy foods due to effective encouragement from staff. This means that parents and carers learn to distinguish between foods which are more or less healthy for them. Adult users and children learn to exercise methodically due to regular walks to local parks which are led by centre staff. Regular clinics operate from the centre and so a careful check is kept on each baby's weight.

The centre manager, coordinator and all staff place a high emphasis on users' safety, including those who are most vulnerable. Due to the effectiveness of staff, users' welfare inside and outside the centre is facilitated well. One parent said, 'The centre gives you access to the information you need at a local level, especially about safety which is very important when you have children.' Postnatal courses are used well to develop users' awareness of everyday hazards. For example, in a recent session users learnt productively about car-seat safety.

External agencies report that the centre uses the Common Assessment Framework rigorously. Very small numbers of children are supported through this system or child protection plans because the centre works in partnership with other agencies effectively to support all children and their families. This ensures that fewer families need to move on to this higher level of support. Vulnerable children, including those who are looked after and their families are supported sympathetically and are provided with counselling sessions at the centre. The centre knows the needs of the families it works with well. This, coupled with early identification and careful prevention, plays a key role in the centre's work to reduce harm to children and their families.

Children have very positive relationships with staff, and so they enjoy learning because they are stimulated and inspired by interesting activities. For instance, they explore making music in 'Rhyme Time' because of the good use of staff expertise. Children's independence is encouraged skilfully by staff. This means that they are prepared thoughtfully for the future. They are keen to come to the centre and so they achieve well. Transfer arrangements to local schools are well established and so children feel comfortable about the move.

Adult users contribute their views regularly. The centre manager listens carefully to users' comments and ideas. In addition, parents and carers are regularly encouraged to evaluate the sessions that they have attended. The centre uses this feedback to improve its services. For example, evening sessions were established because users asked for them. Community cohesion is promoted effectively, especially in integrating parents from different age groups and backgrounds. The centre has a good reputation in the local community.

Parents and carers develop their skills successfully. This means that some have learnt how to write a well-structured curriculum vitae because of effectively established links with the Connexion's team. Adult users learn about how massage can be used to stimulate key parts of the body such as the lymph system. In some activities a few fathers attend the centre sessions. Parents and carers are provided

with a good range of information and guidance regarding early education and childcare options in the local area to support them in gain paid employment. Jobcentre Plus sessions are run effectively from the centre each month. Financial advice has enabled parents and carers to receive the extra benefits to which they are entitled.

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 centre understands its users' needs well as a result of careful assessments. The senior leadership team, with representatives from a range of agencies, meet regularly to ensure services are being improved for users. Children's language development is given a high priority because accurate evaluation has identified this as an area which is not well developed for a few children. Children make good progress in learning to speak due to well trained staff and adult users.

The centre provides a good range of in-house and outreach services and activities, matched well to the needs of users in the surrounding area. It is successful in engaging with hard-to-reach groups. Various users from minority ethnic backgrounds engage well with the centre because it runs special sessions for particular groups. Parenting courses are highly valued by parents and carers. 'Stay and Play' sessions help children to explore a wide variety of materials in well-equipped inside areas. Occasionally, a few learning areas do not offer sufficient opportunities for children to develop their key skills of literacy in the open air. Young parents and carers regularly attend antenatal sessions at the centre because of good staff know-how. One parent summed up the thoughts of others when they wrote, 'Everything is very well organised and staff are extremely helpful and friendly (obviously all love their jobs).' The centre keeps suitable records of local participation rates and engagement in different activities offered and so it can show that most users attend activities regularly.

All parents who spoke to the inspectors were extremely positive about the centre and the effect that it is having on their families. They value highly the care from all staff and the impact it is having on them. For example, one parent explained, 'Before I came to the centre my life was all downs and now it is all ups.' Outreach provision ensures targeted groups of users in the wider community, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities, are supported well.

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	1

How effective are the leadership and management?

2

Strong leadership is provided by senior leaders and at all levels. Staff are keen to improve the centre. On a day-to-day basis, the centre runs efficiently. Resources are managed well and effectively targeted towards users with the greatest needs. Users' views are regularly sought and significantly influence services. In a recent survey virtually all users expressed a high level of satisfaction with the centre. The manager of the centre has developed careful systems and procedures to ensure that provision and information are integrated successfully.

Governance arrangements are good, and lines of accountability are used well. Members of the advisory board are totally committed to improving outcomes for children and their families in the local area and are well informed about the services offered. Self-evaluation is used well by the advisory board and staff to create a valuable improvement plan. The centre has already identified that it does not always gather evidence fully to show what impact it has on users. This is due to the fact that it does not record individual children's and adult users' achievements rigorously. All relevant partners are thoroughly involved in the drive for improvement because of the high expectations and excellent level of dedication of the centre manager and coordinator. As a result of effective leadership and management and good outcomes for users, value for money is good.

Partnership working is a significant strength of the centre's work and is outstanding. For example, Excellent partnerships with early years specialists mean that many adult users have completed a very popular course called 'A programme for Mum's with boys aged 0-5 years' which develops their understanding of the differences between boys' and girls' development and what motivates boys' to learn.

Staff carefully share information after they have gained users' permission to do so. Inter-agency working is flourishing and it carefully identifies those families and children who are at sizeable risk. Protocols and practices for referrals are used well by staff. Childminders are supported through training and activity sessions because links with them are extremely well established. Parents and carers can find out about all the different opportunities for early education and schools because of very strong partnerships with providers in the area.

The centre's child protection policy and safeguarding arrangements are good. All staff have been fully trained at the appropriate level in child protection procedures. Risk assessments are created effectively for many activities. The centre is well maintained and health and safety issues are dealt with rapidly. The centre keeps detailed records about staff which contain valuable information on, for example, their references from previous employers. Records indicate that all staff working at the centre have been subject to an enhanced Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check.

The centre promotes equality and diversity and tackles discrimination well. Staff are hugely committed to encouraging the inclusion of all families from the surrounding areas. The centre gathers valuable information about the different groups and evaluates their engagement suitably. Children and adult users with disabilities are well provided for by access to appropriate professional support. The centre thoughtfully develops children's and parents' awareness of our diverse community. This means that adult and younger users learn effectively about the meaning of celebrations such as Eid and Easter.

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	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
--	----------

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

No early years, childcare or nursery provision has directly contributed to the children's centre report or judgements.

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 SA8 The Alban Way Children's Centre on 9-10 June 2011. We judged the centre as good overall.

The children's centre is a good place for you and your children to come for guidance. Thank you for helping us to find out about your children's centre. We enjoyed having the opportunity of talking to you.

You and your children really value the centre. You said the staff are very approachable and that they raise your self-confidence successfully. We heard that you like sessions where your children can explore all sorts of materials and resources, as well as learn how to speak effectively. You all like trying healthy activities, such a baby massage and yoga, and benefit from the support from highly skilled staff.

Your children make good progress in their learning and behave well at the centre. It helps to prepare your children successfully for the next stage of education. The 'Rhyme Time' is well resourced and so, for example, you develop your children's understanding of how to make music through good use of instruments. You learn effectively to keep yourself and your family safe whether you are at home or out and about, for example, through effective first-aid courses.

You told us that you and your children are cared for extremely well by staff and inspection evidence confirms your view. You really value the parenting courses,

which develop your skills in promoting cooperation and self-discipline in children. This means that you learn about how important it is to use positive comments with your children to help nurture their understanding. Several of you told us how very well staff guide you when you ask for advice on a wide range of topics such as weaning. The staff work closely with other agencies to make sure that you are put in contact with others who can give you the right help and support. The centre works extremely well with other health and educational providers in the area and so you receive outstanding guidance for your personal and family lives.

The centre welcomes people from all backgrounds and treats everyone equally and fairly. The centre manager and coordinator have good ideas about ways to improve the centre. They carry out regular surveys to find out what you are happy with and where you are less pleased. The centre responds well to your requests and has given you, for example, access to extra sessions at times which suit you best.

We have asked the centre manager and senior staff to look at how they can make things even better. One of our recommendations is to record your achievements and those of your children in key areas of learning even more carefully than they do now. In this way, the centre can show how effective it has been in supporting you and your families. Also, the centre has been asked to develop the resources and use of outside areas in order to encourage children to practice their skills of reading in the fresh air.

It was a pleasure to meet you and your children. We hope that you continue to flourish and enjoy your time at the Alban Way Children's Centre.

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