

Inspection report for Friar Park, Mesty Croft and Woods Children's Centre

Local authority	Sandwell
Inspection number	383678
Inspection dates	11–12 October 2011
Reporting inspector	Susan Walsh

Centre leader	Matt Lee
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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Linked school if applicable	The Priory Primary School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Our Place 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.



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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 senior managers, family support workers, health and education professionals, and representatives of the local authority. They spoke with users of the centre.

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

Information about the centre

Friar Park, Mesty Croft and Woods Children's Centre is a phase one centre which provides a core offer of integrated services that include health, family support, early years advice and guidance and adult learning. It was managed under the strategic direction of the local Health Care Trust until 31 March 2011. The local authority has taken over responsibility as the lead agency for the centre on a temporary basis because the majority of children's centre services in the local authority are subject to a re-tendering process. Although the staffing is stable, several key members of the staff team have recently been absent. The centre receives the advice and guidance of a partnership board which performs the same function as a management advisory board.

The Friar Park, Mesty Croft and Woods Children's Centre shares a campus with The Priory Primary School and Our Place Nursery and, together, they form The Priory Family Centre. The area served by the centre also includes the localities of Mesty Croft and the Woods. Some of its services are delivered in the local community at Wood's Methodist Church. In addition to working in partnership with The Priory Primary School, the centre also has links with Mesty Croft Primary School, Park Hill Primary School and Tameside Primary School. Neither the linked primary school nor the linked nursery was inspected at the same time as the children's centre.

The proportion of children who live in workless households is above average. Children start the Reception class in the co-located primary school with skills that are usually well below those that are expected for their age. The population served by the centre is largely White British and there are very few families from other ethnic heritages.

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 families

1

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

1

Main findings

Friar Park, Mesty Croft and Woods Children's Centre provides an outstanding service for the young children, parents, carers and families who live within its reach area. The centre is truly at the heart of the local community. It provides a very welcoming environment where families can socialise and have fun while having the opportunity to access excellent care, guidance and support. The centre is especially good at helping parents and carers to develop the skills that will improve their economic well-being. This is because pathways to training and employment are readily accessible. Many adults volunteer in the centre. They are keen to point out how this has improved their levels of confidence. They also speak enthusiastically about the many skills they have gained while attending the many courses that are delivered in the centre. As one parent said, reflecting the views of many, 'Without the centre I would not be where I am now.'

The range of services that is offered is outstanding and results in positive outcomes as families deepen their understanding of how to live healthy lifestyles and keep themselves safe. Support can be given as soon as it is needed. As a result, it has the maximum impact particularly on ensuring that children are kept safe because of early contact with families and an excellent working partnership with health visitors. However, the centre has had less success at encouraging mothers to breastfeed and in breaking down the negative attitudes to breastfeeding prevalent in the local area. Currently, there is no breastfeeding support group in the centre and the centre has not trained and deployed peer supporters.

The centre reaches a very high number of families in the area it serves, and many activities are over-subscribed. Activities are also held at weekends and during the

summer holiday; in particular, the trips and big community events often attract exceptionally large numbers of families who are keen to take advantage of the exciting range of opportunities offered by the centre. The Common Assessment Framework is used well by the centre to ensure that families can access the type of support that is most appropriate to their individual needs. The centre is especially good at helping families in times of crisis. The main areas of need are precisely identified and work is carried out within a clear timescale and is carefully evaluated. Therefore, support is tightly focused and has maximum impact on families' well-being. The centre and its staff are keen to embrace pioneering practice. For example, the use of 'The Children's Room' to provide intensive support for some of the hardest-to-reach families and their children has brought about outstanding improvements to outcomes for children and their families.

All staff share the leader's exceptional enthusiasm, commitment and ambition for the future. The centre meets safeguarding requirements and promotes equality and diversity exceptionally well. The analysis of the needs of those who use the centre is very good indeed. Parents have excellent opportunities to contribute to shaping the development of the centre, and they and other members of the local community are well represented on the partnership board. The centre has clearly identified where improvements are necessary, and the strategies for improvement are being rigorously implemented. In particular, the centre is innovative and has secured a wide variety of funding streams in order to ensure that popular and effective activities, such as football sessions for fathers and their children, can continue even when the original source of funding is no longer available. The way that the centre has sustained outstanding provision and continued to move forward in uncertain times illustrates its outstanding capacity for further improvement.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Improve the percentage of mothers who initiate and sustain breastfeeding by:
 - addressing the negative attitudes towards breastfeeding that are prevalent in the local area
 - starting a breastfeeding support group
 - training and deploying peer supporters.

How good are outcomes for families?

1

Very good partnerships with health visitors together with the sterling work of the centre staff ensure that parents and carers of young children and babies are offered a good level of support. All parents of young babies are visited by a family support worker when their children are six months old and are offered additional support if they are struggling to cope. This has a significant effect on the mental health of mothers because postnatal depression can be recognised and addressed. Although rates for initiating and sustaining breastfeeding are slightly above local levels, they are still well below national levels and the centre has struggled to counteract

ingrained negative views towards breastfeeding that exist in the area. Those mothers who wish to breastfeed are offered expert support from the health visiting team, but this specialist support is not fully reinforced by the work of the children's centre.

Many users say that the staff in the centre have provided important emotional support at times when they were potentially vulnerable. There is an excellent emphasis on helping children, parents to be aware of how to keep themselves and their families safe. Safety equipment is provided when necessary, and many parents and carers complete first-aid courses. Parents say that they feel very safe and secure in the centre and the parents' forum has contributed to establishing a very calm ethos in the centre. Staff support families who are facing challenging circumstances exceptionally well. Relationships between staff and users of the centre are warm and supportive. Consequently, parents and carers feel able to talk about their problems, including reporting domestic abuse when it occurs, and are helped to access expert advice. Excellent support provided by the centre in partnership with the health visiting team has resulted in many parents being able to improve their parenting skills and the quality of their own and their families' lives. Consequently, the number of children being subject to child protection plans has declined and, currently, there are no children under five on child protection plans in the area served by the children's centre.

Children make good progress in their learning when they attend the centre's provision and demonstrate excellent behaviour and very good relationships. Enjoyment levels are high and children grow quickly in confidence. Consequently, the proportion of children who attend the centre and go on to reach national expectations in their personal, social and emotional development and in communication, language and literacy at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage has improved significantly. Early identification of children who are at risk of falling behind in their development, particularly their use of language, and the centre's work with the speech and language service and parents to improve children's language skills have been important factors in securing these improvements. The gap between the lowest achieving 20% in the Early Years Foundation Stage and the rest of the children is being significantly reduced at the adjacent primary school, but the centre is aware that the gap is not reducing at the same pace in other local primary schools. The centre is particularly good at supporting children with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their families, including supporting these children's transition into primary school. Not only does the centre extend the range of experiences for children, adults also benefit from the trips to local attractions, the theatre and the seaside and from their involvement in cultural events like the 'Big Draw'.

Parents make an outstanding contribution by volunteering to help in the centre. A parent is responsible for the excellent website and others regularly run the 'Dress for Less' clothing stall. Families have also made an excellent contribution to improving the environment in the local community. Many families have made outstanding progress in their personal and social development and have improved their financial position. Parents recognise the small but achievable steps they need to take in order to reach their ultimate goals. There have been many very successful courses that

have helped parents and carers to improve their skills, including their skills in literacy and numeracy, and gain nationally recognised qualifications. Additionally, parents are able to access work experience in order to improve their levels of confidence and receive expert guidance regarding applying for jobs and developing their curricula vitae. This is because of a strong partnership with JobCentre Plus and the sterling work of a volunteer who runs the work club. As a result of the exceptional support from the children’s centre, aspirations of families are rising and the local primary school reports that parents are now far more engaged in supporting their children’s education.

These are the grades for the outcomes for families

The extent to which children, including those from target 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	1
The extent to which all children and parents, including those from target groups, 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 parents, including those from target groups, contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	1
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents, including those from target groups, are developing economic stability and independence including access to training and employment	1

How good is the provision?

1

Excellent communication, through the use of a regularly updated and easily navigated website, regular newsletters and extensive leafleting, means that everyone in the neighbourhood knows about the wonderful range of activities available in the children’s centre. Activities such as the ‘Express Library’ and the baby clinic combined with the availability of the café also draw local families into the centre. Consequently, a high proportion of families with children have contact with the centre. The needs of families in the reach area are assessed sensitively and appropriately, and the centre offers an excellent quality and range of services that are exceptionally well matched to local requirements. Very good communication with a wide range of agencies ensures that a high priority is placed on children’s well-being. The centre also actively seeks out parents and carers who would gain the most from using the centre. They do this by making contact with health visitors and other agencies including local schools.

The activities provided by the centre are varied, are of a high quality and are well attended. They promote purposeful learning, enjoyment and development for both children and adults; ultimately, they successfully improve parenting and outcomes for

children and their families. Many activities focus on improving adults' skills and their levels of self-belief as well as developing parents' understanding of how their children can learn through play. The centre always evaluates sessions and takes careful note of parents' and children's responses. It is very successful in providing support for ways back into employment and in helping users to improve their educational attainment. Successes are celebrated, and users and staff receive wholehearted acknowledgements of their personal achievements. The centre staff have been pivotal in producing high-quality resources for families such as the glossy cook book, 'Come Cook with Me' which provides recipes for healthy home-cooked meals. Additionally, 'The Family Activity Pack' provides families with a wide range of creative activities which encourage children to learn through play, and the 'Express Library' ensures that parents have access to a range of attractive books which they can share with their children.

Potentially vulnerable families are quickly identified and receive high-quality individual support that sometimes involves eliciting the support of other agencies in developing a whole package of care. Additionally, parents report that they are offered excellent support in times of crisis. As one parent said, 'I would be lost without them,' when referring to the centre's staff. The centre ensures that high-quality information about many aspects of parenting, including advice about how to keep children healthy and safe, is freely available to parents. Outstanding support and advice have helped families to manage their debts and achieve economic stability. Additionally, guidance on stopping smoking, tackling alcohol and drug misuse and improving sexual health is also offered. Parents report that this high-quality advice has a significant impact on their lives.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	1
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups	1
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups	1

How effective are the leadership and management?

1

The leadership at all levels is focused clearly on providing an outstanding range of services that are precisely matched to the exact needs of the users in the reach area. Very high expectations are shared by all staff. Leaders are very enthusiastic, but they are also extremely reflective and keen to continually improve practice. They channel their efforts to good effect and manage themselves and others well. Professional management systems are used very effectively to monitor the work of the centre, and there are clear lines of accountability. The local authority has continued to monitor and challenge the centre during this period of change. The partnership board includes professionals, parents and members of the local community and,

together with the parents' forum, is strongly focused on meeting the needs of families in the local community. The centre seeks regular feedback from parents about the quality of its services and makes considerable use of this information to continuously refine what it offers.

Partnerships are pivotal to the centre's excellent work. Local providers report that they have had excellent support from the children's centre staff, particularly relating to improving children's well-being. The centre has an extremely conscientious approach to safeguarding. All staff have their backgrounds and identities checked carefully. Staff training is thorough, and staff are exceptionally sensitive to child protection issues. The centre successfully promotes equality and diversity. The inclusion of all children and their families is central to its work. All parents are made welcome irrespective of their background, and the centre makes a considerable contribution to improving the quality of life for everyone in the local community. Leaders know exactly where the strengths and weaknesses of their services lie and have formulated detailed plans for improvement. Staff absence has been managed well, but some individuals have had a heavy load and some developments in the area of health promotion have slowed slightly. The centre has faced many challenges recently, particularly in the way activities are funded. The on-site nursery faced closure and the centre joined forces with other local providers to ensure that local families were able to continue to access nursery provision. The centre offers exceptional value for money and is particularly creative in the way it attracts funding and promotes sustainability.

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	1
The effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secure improvement in outcomes	1
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	1
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	1
The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services provided by the centre to meet its core purpose	1
The extent to which the centre supports and encourages families in the reach area to engage with services and uses their views to develop the range of provision	1

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

Inspectors took into account the inspection report relating to The Priory Primary School which was completed in December 2008. This inspection report judged the provision in the Early Years Foundation Stage to be outstanding.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Friar Park, Mesty Croft and Woods Sure Start Children's Centre on 11 and 12 October 2011. We judged the centre as outstanding 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. It is clear that you are highly delighted with what the centre has to offer. This is because the children's centre provides an outstanding range of services that are helping children and families in Friar Park and the surrounding area. It is obvious that there is a huge amount of fun and enjoyment in the centre. We were also very impressed by the way the centre organises trips for you all and exciting events like the 'Big Draw'.

Many of you are volunteers at the centre and you are making a very valuable contribution to the smooth running of the centre, for example, through organising and updating the centre website, running the work club and the 'Dress for Less' clothes stall. We were very impressed when we heard about all the courses you have attended and admired the way you have developed your confidence, your academic qualifications and your practical skills. It was heartening to see how many of the volunteers have been able to transfer the skills they gained through volunteering and work experience and use them to gain employment.

The activities provided by the centre are having a big impact on your children's development and well-being. The centre is good at helping your children to develop their language skills. Excellent working partnerships with the speech and language service are a big help in this respect. Your children are helped to settle quickly when they start primary school, and the centre is especially good at helping children with additional needs cope with the transition to primary school. The 'Children's Room' has really helped some families to manage their children's behaviour and keep their children safe. We noticed that the centre is good at helping you to keep fit and healthy but also noted that the centre is not having enough impact on low breastfeeding rates in your area. Although the health visiting team provides good support for mothers who wish to breastfeed, this personal support is not at present reinforced by activities run by the children's centre. Currently, there is an absence of

a breastfeeding group or peer supporters. Therefore, we have asked the centre to improve this situation.

The centre works exceptionally well with its partners. Good links with the health professionals are making it much easier to attend baby clinics and to gain useful information about how to keep your children healthy and safe. Staff work very effectively to help families who are involved with the centre to improve their children's outcomes. They work very hard to ensure that children are kept safe, particularly in times of crisis. We judged the care, guidance and support that are provided by the centre to be outstanding. You have access to lots of high-quality information about how to keep your families fit and healthy and about what you can do to improve the quality of family life.

The centre is managed very well by a keen and experienced leader who is supported by an enthusiastic team of staff who work together very well. They make sure that activities are of an exceptionally high quality and that they are highly effective in improving outcomes for children and their families. They listen carefully to the feedback given by those who attend activities and use that information to enhance the quality of provision when necessary. Parents are well represented on the advisory board and have ample opportunities to contribute to the strategic direction of the centre.

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