

# Inspection report for Armstrong Sure Start Children's Centre

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Local authority	Newcastle Upon Tyne
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Centre leader	Mrs Lin Simmonds
Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
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Linked school if applicable	Not applicable
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Not applicable

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 alongside the inspection of Westgate Children's Centre inspection by two of Her Majesty's Inspectors and two early year's inspectors. The inspectors held meetings with the centre manager, staff from the centre and partner agencies including representatives from the health service and a senior officer from the local authority. They also had discussions with users, observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

## Information about the centre

Armstrong Sure Start Children's Centre is one of two children's centres that together form Sure Start West Riverside in the heart of the west-end of the city of Newcastle upon Tyne. Services and activities are provided across a network of buildings and through partnership working with health services, the voluntary community and private sector and local schools. One Sure Start area lead provides leadership of both Armstrong and Westgate children's centres and they share the same staff and utilise the skills and expertise of the same partners. Families and communities recognise West Riverside as one overarching centre, rather than two separate ones. Both inspections were carried out at the same time and the team conducted joint interviews and visited similar settings where families from both communities attend.

Armstrong Children's Centre is a 'virtual' centre because there is not a main building. Like Westgate, Armstrong serves communities that experience significant social and economic deprivation. The latest information available indicates that nearly half of the children are described as living in poverty and the proportion of children aged under-five who are living in households where no one is working is well above average. Families and children attending the centre come from a wide range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds and about half of the children entering Reception classes in schools in the area come from minority ethnic communities. An increasing proportion of these are children of economic migrants from Eastern Europe.

The majority of children enter Early Years Foundation Stage settings and schools with skills and abilities that are well below those expected for their age. The proportion known to be eligible for free school meals is well above average. The number of disabled children and those with special educational needs, including those with a statement of special educational needs, is also above national averages. Governance arrangements for the centre are provided through the Sure Start West Riverside Partnership Board. The advisory board comprises the centre leader and managers from the two centres, partners and parent representatives.

## 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**

**2**

### Capacity for sustained improvement

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

**2**

## Main findings

Armstrong Sure Start Children's Centre is a good and improving centre. Some aspects of its work are outstanding. Leadership, partnership working and the way partners and the centre's staff work to improve health outcomes for children and their parents successfully are particular strengths. A warm and friendly welcome beckons all who enter the wide range of services and well-resourced activities available across the local community.

Energising leadership has harnessed staff and partners' enthusiasm to reach out into the community and raise aspirations and achievements of all, particularly those families who are most disadvantaged, and to good effect. Outcomes for users are at least good. The proportion of children achieving average levels in their early learning goals when they leave Reception class, although below average, is improving well. Headteachers report children entering school who have attended centre activities are more ready for school and achieve well from their individual starting points. However, until recently there was no formal assessment system to confirm headteachers' views. An early years tracking system has been developed for children up to the age of five to ensure a more rigorous approach to measuring the impact of provision on their achievements. Some independent and voluntary sector childcare settings and schools are using this. Leaders recognise the need to apply this good practice throughout the area to ensure that all settings can evaluate the impact of their actions on children's progress.

Through a thorough analysis of local and individual needs and consultation with children and their families, the centre is able to provide a range of activities that meet the needs of their

diverse community. Partners and centre staff provide timely, sensitive support to families and children who are facing significant or temporary challenges in their lives. All children and parents and carers of children who are subject to a child protection plan are well-supported and virtually all attend activities that are helping children to remain safely with their families. Parents report how safe and caring the centre is. They comment that they are able to contribute to the work of the centre through regular discussions with staff and detailed evaluations of activities.

Good actions are taken to ensure equality of opportunity and to tackle discrimination of any kind. As a result, stereotyping behaviour is tackled well. Actions taken to narrow the gaps between achievements of children and parents and the city average are increasingly successful. For example, the number of mothers who sustain breastfeeding for more than six weeks has moved from well below to similar to the city average over the last three years.

Leadership of the centre is exemplary and governance arrangements are outstanding. The well-established Partnership Board has wide representation from across the community, from locally commissioned services and from parents. The 'Parents' Voice' group has benefited from training and support from the centre team and has a strong voice in the governance of the centre. The board continues to strive to widen the representation of parents.

Safeguarding is given a high priority and safeguarding procedures meet statutory requirements and are good. Recruitment procedures are robust and quality assurance of all partners' procedures is rigorous. Performance management arrangements are continually reviewed to ensure staff and partners are held to account for their work effectively. All services are required to provide detailed quarterly reports and case studies that illustrate the impact of their work. However, some do not focus sufficiently on the impact of their work and how it helps meet the centre's challenging targets for improvement. Leaders and partners are fully aware of what is working well and what needs to improve and self-evaluation is rigorous and inclusive. Succinct action plans for improvement are monitored and evaluated tenaciously. Given the collective impact of the centre and its partners' actions to improve the life chances of their children and families, the centre's capacity to improve is good.

## **What does the centre need to do to improve further?**

### **Recommendations for further improvement**

- Extend the Partnership Board's ability to evaluate fully the impact of the centre's work by:
  - embedding across all services the good practice seen in some services in evaluating impact of actions on the progress children make from their starting points
  - ensuring all quarterly evaluations of services provide evidence of the impact on outcomes for users.

## How good are outcomes for families?

The very strong and conspicuous impact of partnership working to promote children's and families' emotional well-being and physical health is evident across the work of the centre. This includes the excellent work and tireless dedication of health visitors, family support workers and 'Change 4 Life' champions as well as a wide range of services commissioned directly by the centre. The promotion of healthy lifestyles threads through every activity, from cookery classes to well-attended weaning programmes. Extremely popular 'Teenie Weenie' sessions provide a first-class opportunity for parents and children to learn that exercise and keeping fit can be fun. The clear routes of progression from this universal programme into more intensive activities, such as 'Mini on the Go', ensure the maximum impact for those families in most need of intervention and support. As a result, there has been a 6% point reduction in the incidence of obesity in Reception-aged children across the reach population from April 2011 to April 2012. Breastfeeding rates have also increased by 7% over the same period, with the greatest increase seen in the most disadvantaged areas, where provision and resources have been particularly targeted. The excellent work of local health professionals, ably assisted by breastfeeding peer support volunteers as well as the much improved links with the Royal Victoria Infirmary all contribute to the continued upward trend in these figures. In addition, health visitors confirm that 97% of infants are currently checked at 6 to 8 weeks, an improvement from 82% in 2008/09. This compelling evidence shows that a very large majority of families are engaging with appropriate health services.

Robust policies and effective procedures ensure children are well-safeguarded. Security is good and is underpinned by effective risk assessments carried out both by staff and partners using the various venues. As a result, the large majority of parents say they feel safe in the centre and would feel confident turning to centre staff for support if there were concerns. Regular events, such as child safety week and visits to the local 'Safety Works', ensure that families gain a good understanding of how to keep themselves and their families safe. During 'new birth' visits, outreach staff offer practical advice about potential dangers in the home and inform parents of how to minimise these, including signposting them to low cost safety equipment schemes. Efficient multi-agency support for families referred to the centre in times of acute crisis is helping to improve outcomes for children on child protection plans. Progress is closely monitored and sustained engagement with the centre often provides a continuing lifeline following more intensive intervention. 'Support for Families Pathway' meetings ensure children and family's needs are met thoroughly within care packages.

The extent to which children, including disabled children and those with special educational needs, enjoy and achieve is good. The gap between the lowest 20% of children achieving expected levels in key early learning goals and that for all children in Newcastle has narrowed considerably over the past year and at a faster rate than that for the city as a whole. Work is underway to track the individual achievements of children who attend the children's centre, with encouraging results. The centre recognises the need to extend the good practice across the whole range of services and activities offered to record more accurately the progress individual children are making through their participation. The Sure Start teacher has informed staff, including those working in partner settings, on how to apply good practice in tracking children's progress and identifying their next steps

successfully. Case studies and discussions with parents reveal the positive impact that parenting skills courses and the nurturing programme have had on parents and their children's personal development, learning, behaviour and well-being. One parent told us that without the support of the centre she would have 'had no future at all'.

Many parents, including young mums, lone parents and some dads, commented on how their confidence as parents has improved through their participation in activities offered by the centre. Parents say they feel more confident and influential through participation in the Parent's Voice group, through focus groups and consultation regarding the self-evaluation and governance of the centre. Many are also represented on the Partnership Board and this reflects the centre's commitment to parents to contribute in a meaningful way. There are some good examples of how parents have had opportunities to influence the design and setting up of services, including the development of the 'Teenie Weenies' group. Parents participated in the consultation about the future delivery of Sure Start services in the local area and influenced the local authority's proposals.

The centre has helped parents into learning, training and employment successfully through its excellent partnerships with a range of local organisations. These include Adult Learning, Building Futures East and Newcastle Futures. Collectively, they have enabled around 1800 parents across both children's centre areas to access a range of training opportunities, including in literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology. Parents say the completion of these courses has given them a real sense of achievement. Parents told of how they are assisted in setting and achieving their own goals, and of their increased confidence and self-esteem. One parent typically stated that without the support of her development worker she 'would not now be doing a job that I love'. The very real impact of this support is clearly evident in the increased aspirations of parents we spoke to. There is good evidence to show that poverty levels are decreasing across the whole West Riverside reach, and this is underpinned through the work of the specialist welfare rights service worker. This role, in partnership with other local agencies, has contributed to an increase of over a quarter of a million pounds worth of additional benefits claimed.

These are the grades for the outcomes for families:

<b>The extent to which children, including those from target groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which all children and parents, including those from target groups, enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>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</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>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.</b>	<b>2</b>

## How good is the provision?

2

A wide range of services and activities are delivered across the reach area, and these reflect the specific needs of the community. For example, the centre offers drop-in opportunities targeted at the increasing Czech Roma population to ensure they receive important information on entitlements and support for their family. The well-established 'Supporting Families Pathway' is a good example of the centre's work with partners to assess the needs of some members of its community whose circumstances make them most vulnerable. Parents told us of the life-enhancing support they had received and the confidence they had gained, enabling them to move forward successfully. 'I feel I have something to get up for in the morning', said one mum, while another spoke of being more confident to read and play with her children. Practitioners engage sensitively with families to help them overcome their anxiety and relax in the welcoming, safe and comfortable surroundings.

Home visits from family support workers and through commissioned services have led to the successful engagement of harder-to-reach families, enabling them to access a range of services. These visits cover a wide range of issues including safety checks and parenting support. The level of personal support received by families has contributed to the genuine sense of trust in and respect for staff. The centre has extended its range of good quality provision and activities are well located and effectively engage the majority of target groups.

Provision to help children learn and develop is good and helps to ensure that the achievements and aspirations of children are raised. Parents say that they feel empowered and comment on the real difference the centre has made to their own confidence and learning. The celebration of achievements is an integral part of the culture of this welcoming and inclusive centre. The commitment of parent support advisors, combined with effective and collaborative arrangements for transition which involve parents, staff and schools, ensures that children are well prepared for the next steps in their education.

Good care, guidance and support together with highly effective multi-agency work ensure that families are receiving the right support in a timely way. This is particularly demonstrated through the shared actions by teams to improve outcomes for children who are disabled or have special educational needs. Effective working partnerships between relevant external agencies, including the speech and language therapy team, ensure the provision of appropriate support and advice. The centre disseminates a wide range of good quality information booklets and leaflets to families. Family support workers have attended training on a wide range of topics including breastfeeding, smoking cessation, safeguarding, domestic violence and parenting skills. Through this breadth of knowledge they are able to advise and signpost parents effectively. The well-established links with external groups and agencies, such as Health Works, West End Women and Girls Group and Jobcentre Plus, also ensure that families have access to more specialised support.

These are the grades for the quality of provision:

<b>The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of families, including those in target groups</b>	<b>2</b>
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<b>The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups.</b>	<b>2</b>

## **How effective are the leadership and management?**

**2**

Energised leadership and strong teamwork ensure highly effective and successful integrated support and provision for families across the area. Priorities for the centre are successfully developed with partners. They stem from a thorough audit of local need and outcomes, and from consultation with parents and children. They inform the centre's challenging targets for improvement. Plans developed as a result of the audit and rigorous self-evaluation processes link well to the broader priorities of the city. Detailed reports are provided to the Partnership Board with clear evidence of progress against priorities and key activities.

Performance management arrangements are robust. Lines of accountability across the centre and partners are understood and followed. Supervision and appraisals take place regularly and outcomes feed into evaluations of the centre's work and the development of future priorities. Clear and succinct individual service action plans for improvement are reviewed quarterly with key partners, including the local authority's Head of Early Intervention and the centre manager. All services, including commissioned services, are required to provide quarterly evaluations and case studies of impact. However, some are not focused well enough on the impact of their work on the centre's key targets. In recognition of this, leaders have developed an assessment process focused on outcomes to add further rigour to the target-setting process and sharpen accountability arrangements.

The centre promotes equality, tackles discrimination and celebrates diversity effectively. Equality and diversity training is undertaken by all staff and they have targets within their appraisals to ensure they promote equality successfully. Prejudice-based bullying or harassment of any kind is tackled robustly and many opportunities provided for families from the range of diverse communities to mix so that stereotypes can also be tackled and relationships developed successfully. The 'Parents' Voice' group have attended ARCH training (Agencies against Racist Crime and Harassment) and report they feel well-equipped to challenge racist comments or inappropriate behaviour. Concerted action to improve the life chances of all communities has resulted in the gap narrowing between children's outcomes and those across the city and particularly for some of the most vulnerable children, such as those with identified special educational needs.

Safety is paramount and all reasonable precautions are taken. Safeguarding procedures are good. All policies and procedures meet statutory requirements. Staff training is regular, comprehensive and inclusive. This includes staff completing enhanced safeguarding training on vulnerable adults as well as children.

Resources are managed and used to best effect across this densely populated city centre area. Partnership working stretches resources well and helps to sustain or commission key services where additional needs are identified. Outreach work and well-attended key events in local communities extend the reach and impact of the work of the centre successfully. Many more parents and children are using the centre as a result, particularly those in the most disadvantaged communities. A number of parents have completed testimonies about the impact of the centre's activities on their own and their children's learning, development and achievements. These are published and displayed in venues to encourage others to take part in all the centre has to offer. Some particularly compelling case studies from families at risk of their children entering the care system illustrate the good impact the centre has on keeping children safe in their families. The centre provides good value for money.

Leaders actively seek out the views of families to ensure activities meet their needs and interests. For example, parents felt that there should be more opportunities to be physically active with their children, and in a venue that would encourage high participation rates. As a result, the 'Teenie Weenies' and 'WaterPeep' activities were set up in local leisure centres where children and parents and carers can get physically active and have great fun together. Following parent requests, disabled children are fully included in activities with their peers and additional funded opportunities provided at a local respite centre. Through national strategies such as Listening to Children, centre staff are increasingly successful in securing the views of the young children who attend activities, responding to their views to improve activities. Following consultation with children on their view of summer activities provided in 2011, changes have been made for 2012.

These are the grades for leadership and management:

<b>The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day-to-day management arrangements are clear and understood</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secures improvement in outcomes</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>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</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>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.</b>	<b>2</b>

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

None

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## Summary for centre users

We inspected Armstrong Children's Centre on 23 and 24 May 2012. We visited activities, looked at the centre's plans and documents and talked with you and professionals. Following this work, we have judged Armstrong to be a good centre overall and improving.

The children's centre provides a really wide range of activities, which are aimed at helping families improve their lives. The views of those of you who spoke to us support this as you tell us that you are very happy with the activities you use because they have helped you in lots of different ways. For example, many of you have received excellent support to lead healthier lifestyles, while others have found the support for children with speech difficulties 'supportive' and 'hugely informative'. In particular, activities and provision to encourage more mums to breastfeed have been very successful. We saw lots of good provision for pre-school children and some children are doing better as a result, especially in making friends and developing speaking, listening and reading skills. We have asked the centre to extend the use of its recently developed tracking system, so that they have a better understanding of the extra progress your child is making as a result of coming with you to these groups.

Most importantly, you tell us that you 'feel safe at the centre', and can 'trust the staff to help you when you most need it'. You particularly appreciate the support of the outreach workers and have welcomed home visits and the opportunity to go with someone to a group until you build your confidence and make new friends. We found that the centre was really good at helping you at times in your life when you most need it. We also found that action was taken quickly and that different people and organisations worked well as a team to support both children and families.

We found that the centre is working very well with partners such as health visitors. You tell us that it is good to go to the 'antenatal drop-ins baby social groups' where you have the opportunity to talk to the health professional or the outreach worker in a relaxed, informal environment.

The people in charge of the children's centre are doing a really good job. Managers, together with partners and other staff, have worked hard to make sure that everything the children's centre does for you will make a difference to the area in which you live. We know that everyone who works with West Riverside Children's Centres in Armstrong and Westgate

shares this commitment and we heard lots of examples from you about how they are making a real difference to your lives. The centre has access to lots of detailed information to help them plan future activities. We have asked them to continue to develop the ways in which this information is used and monitored so that they can better evaluate the impact of their work, continuing to improve outcomes for you all.

We know the centre is very good at asking for your opinion on the activities and services you use. We know, because many of you told us, and because we saw a lot of case studies where you have given your views, that you feel genuinely respected and listened to as a result. We were particularly impressed by the work and dedication of the 'Parents' Voice' group and heard first-hand about some of the good work of this group. We hope that you continue to have great success in this aspect of your work. Members of the Partnership Board are keen for even more of you to get involved in helping them decide the types of sessions and activities you would like to go to and would welcome even more of your comments and views.

Thank you to everyone who took the time to come and speak to us, we are very grateful and we wish you every success for the future.

The full report is available from your centre or on our website [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk).