

Inspection report for Alexandra Children's Centre

Local authority	Bolton
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Reporting inspector	Deborah Udakis HMI

Centre leader	Wendy Carson
Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
Centre address	Blackledge Street Bolton Lancashire BL3 4BL
Telephone number	01204 337347
Fax number	01204 337349
Email address	wendy.carson@bolton.gov.uk

Linked school if applicable	URN 105142 Alexandra School URN 959878 Alexandra Nursery School and Children's Centre
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	EY278148 Alexandra Under Three's Centre

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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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



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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 one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the centre leaders, centre staff, members of the advisory board, representatives from the local authority, partner agencies and parents.

They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation, including the centre's self-evaluation document, data provided by the local authority and the centre, documents and policies, and minutes of meetings.

Information about the centre

Alexandra Children's Centre is co-located with Alexandra Under Three's Centre, which is managed by a local nursery school, in Bolton. The centre is led by the children's centre network manager, as part of a cluster of three children's centres, on behalf of the local authority. The local authority is coordinating a restructuring and reorganisation of its children's centres which includes the deletion of key posts, including those of leaders. However, the details of the changes have yet to be formalised.

The centre fulfils its core purpose through a range of integrated services relating to health, family support and adult training. The early years childcare provision on site is inspected separately. The reports of this inspection and of the other linked provision are available on our website: www.ofsted.gov.uk.

The centre's advisory board supports the centre's governance and accountability arrangements. The membership of the board is drawn from a range of partners including health, education, maternity services, elected members, Homestart, neighbourhood management, Special Needs Under-Fives Service/Bolton Under-Fives forum, the local authority and parents.

The centre's staff team consists of a children's centre network manager, assistant manager, a leadership team, children's and families' support workers and an administration team.

Alexandra was designated as a phase one children's centre as part of the Sure Start Local Programme in June 2005 and achieved full core offer status in February 2009. It is one of 18 centres in the borough. It serves an urban population. The centre has been purposely designed to offer multi-agency office and community development space. Much of the centre's provision is planned collaboratively with community partners to maximise services for families.

The proportion of workless families, living within the reach area, is 37%, which is significantly above the national average. The percentage of families accessing the childcare element of the Working Families Tax Credit benefit has risen to 12.9%. Parts of the reach area are ranked within the most socially and economically disadvantaged areas in the country. The area is culturally diverse with 62% of families from minority ethnic groups, a large proportion being of Indian and Pakistani heritage. There are an increasing number of families who have moved into the area seeking asylum.

Within the reach area, there are 1,333 children who are nought to four years of age. Children's levels of skill, knowledge and ability on entry to early years provision are well below those expected for their age.

Inspection judgements

Grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Overall effectiveness

The effectiveness of the children's centre in meeting the needs of and improving outcomes for families

2

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

2

Main findings

Alexandra is a good children's centre. This highly inclusive centre is much appreciated and highly prized by families. The majority of users are from India and Pakistan, and increasingly from Eastern Europe and beyond. Parents who made their views known were universally complimentary and supportive of the work of the centre. When asked why they continue to attend activities at the centre, one parent commented, 'Look around, families attend the centre from all backgrounds.' The parent described the support from the centre as, 'Brilliant'. Parents, many of whom were new to English, said that their needs are met well by skilled staff, who go to great lengths to ensure effective communication with families. For

instance, reception staff make good use of electronic translation programmes, sign language and information leaflets, translated in key community languages, to provide vital early help and support to families when they first visit the centre. During the inspection, a childminder escorted a family to the centre and, together with centre staff, helped the parent to access essential services, including childcare.

The enthusiastic and skilled leadership team and practitioners are improving the lives of children and families. The ambitions for the continued success of the centre are shared equally with staff and leaders at all levels. This commitment was evident throughout the inspection, despite centre staff having just been made aware of the potential impact on the centre as a result of the forthcoming restructuring programme.

Governance arrangements are robust and there are clear lines of accountability. Leaders at all levels are aware of the strengths of the setting. The success of the centre is enhanced because of the highly collaborative and effective partnerships with a range of professional agencies. These strong partnerships have enabled the centre to extend and improve the availability of good-quality services significantly. This has led to important improvements in outcomes for families, particularly in relation to health and safeguarding arrangements, and children's enjoyment and achievements in the early years.

Visioning days and planning meetings attended by leaders, parents, practitioners and partners, are used to set key priorities and produce action plans to drive improvement. The advisory board and other leaders take an active role in monitoring the effectiveness of the centre against these agreed priorities.

Areas for development identified during the inspection came as no surprise to leaders. The advisory board plays an important role in the governance of the centre. Parents were represented on the board until late last year. However, there is no parent representative currently. The parents' forum is a welcome addition to the centre and is beginning to capture the views of parents. However, too few parents are engaged in the forum and many parents and partners are not aware that the forum exists.

Unemployment in the area is very high. Leaders acknowledge that there are limited data from adult education partners and Jobcentre Plus to demonstrate learners' successes and the number of those moving into employment.

The centre has good capacity to improve because of the strong, focused leadership and purposeful partnerships with key agencies who share the centre's ambitions for families living in the area. As a result, there is an increasingly positive impact on families, and outcomes for the majority of families are good.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Improve families' economic well-being by:
 - making use of available data to demonstrate the impact of parents' involvement with Jobcentre Plus, and adult learning activities provided away from the centre, on their employment opportunities and their financial stability and independence.
- Further involve parents in the strategic management and governance of the centre, so that their views are fully taken into account by:
 - increasing involvement in, and the families' awareness of, the parents' forum
 - formalising the way parents' views are recorded, acted upon, and fed on to the advisory board
 - ensuring that parents are represented on the advisory board.

How good are outcomes for families?

2

Health outcomes for children and families are good. On-site health services are very well attended. For instance, around 50 to 60 women attend antenatal appointments at the centre each week. The percentage of women initiating breastfeeding has increased to 66%, from 38% in 2011, as a result of targeted support from health partners. At six to eight weeks, 49% continue to breastfeed their babies. Childhood obesity at the end of Reception is below the national average at 7.4% and is down 5% on the previous year. Childhood immunisation rates are very high at 97.7%. Culturally sensitive antenatal support is provided to Asian women to reduce the incidents of diabetes. Activities supporting the good health outcomes for children and families include 'Happy Healthy Toddlers' group, healthy eating programmes, and oral health sessions. The on-site café provides a relaxed social space where families can enjoy affordable, healthy and tasty meals.

Parents who expressed their views said they and their children feel very safe at the centre. The 'Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities' training programme, facilitated at the local mosque, helps participants to develop a strong sense of community and belonging. The multi-agency referral panel (MARP), ensures that concerns regarding individual children and families are acted upon with a strong focus on early help to prevent concerns escalating. Children subject to child protection plans receive effective and timely support. Safeguarding leaders say that the centre's successful work with families prevents concerns escalating and recurring. The Common Assessment Framework (CAF) is used well by staff to secure improved outcomes for children and families. Risk assessments, conducted at the centre, are thorough. Home risk assessments conducted by family support workers, in partnership with parents, and the provision of home-safety equipment, help to raise children's and families' awareness of risks and dangers in the home and their communities.

In the area, early years provision is predominantly good. Leaders say of early years provision, 'Satisfactory is not good enough.' Early Years Foundation Stage Profile data show that all children, including disabled children and those with special educational needs, and those new to English, make good progress as a result of their involvement with the centre and access to high-quality play and learning provision. Early years professionals prioritise additional support to Pakistani heritage children, to help them to gain the skills necessary to support their good transition to school. Excel2learn the Saturday school at the centre, run by qualified teachers from the Pakistani community, provides vital support to children in key subjects. The gap between the lowest and highest achieving 20% has closed considerably and is now at 13%. Good quality speech and language support and early years practitioners focus on communication and language, such as 'Talking Toddlers' sessions, have resulted in most children making good or better progress in their learning by the end of Reception.

Parents and partners play a valuable role in the evaluation of the centre's effectiveness. Parents make their views known through routine feedback and evaluations and this information is always considered to further enhance families' experiences at the centre. One parent said of the centre, 'I don't think they could do anymore.'

The recently formed parents' forum is increasing in popularity but attendance remains very low and the outcome of these meetings is not routinely used to inform the advisory board meetings. Parents are not currently represented on the advisory board.

Parents access a good range of opportunities that enable them to develop their self-esteem and confidence. Adult education activities at the centre provide opportunities for parents to equip them with the basic skills, experiences and aptitudes needed for essential employment-readiness. However, unemployment in the area is very high and around a third of all children under five years of age live in homes dependent on workless benefits. Jobcentre Plus provides valuable advice and support to parents looking for employment. However, there is a lack of available data to demonstrate anything other than satisfactory outcomes regarding economic well-being.

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	2
The extent to which all children and parents, including those from target groups, 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 parents, including those from target groups, contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	3

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.	3
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How good is the provision?

2

All services are targeted to meet community and family needs across the area. The determined and concerted efforts of the family support workers and other key partners have ensured that the centre is successfully engaging with families with circumstances that make them vulnerable. The centre overcomes barriers to ensure that families identified as in greatest need are targeted for support and access the full range of relevant services. One parent commented, 'I just fit in, it's a bit of a home to me.' Another parent said, 'I like coming here, it's special for younger babies.'

Specialist programmes have increased parenting confidence and have helped parents to develop clear and appropriate expectations of behaviour management to secure good outcomes regarding children's safety. Highly effective and skilled partners, such as the British Red Cross and Bolton @Home, provide a range of successful adult learning activities. The Women's Integration Support Project (WISP) provides essential support and learning to refugees and asylum seekers. For instance, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), citizenship, and information and communication technology (ICT) all feature strongly in their provision and help the women to settle, make friends and become part of the community. Adult and family learning activities are popular, and take-up rates for activities are good. However, it is less clear how the adult education provision is supporting adults into employment.

Care, guidance and support are good. Individualised targeted support is a particular strength of the centre. Substantial and compelling case studies show how skilled and expert support provided to families in times of crisis has made a positive difference to their lives. Skilful practitioners, some able to speak fluently in community languages, provide invaluable home visits and direct one-to-one support for families to improve outcomes for families. Parents said they are engaged and consulted at each stage to ensure successful early interventions. Parents and children who are in receipt of intensive support are consistently encouraged and supported to contribute to the process of assessing and reviewing their achievements.

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	2
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups	2
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups.	2

How effective are the leadership and management?

Leaders at all levels are effective and the governance and lines of accountability are very clear. The advisory board is well established, meets regularly, and provides good opportunities to agree key priorities and to evaluate the effectiveness of the centre. All staff are motivated and enthusiastic, and this enthusiasm is shared by partners. Key partners, parents and leaders meet regularly to review and agree action plans which include clear priorities for the success of the centre. The achievements of the centre during the last two years, including the improvement in outcomes for families, the increasing engagement with families, and especially those families identified as being in greatest need, are important. Evaluation of the centre's work is a routine feature, and partners', parents' and children's views are always taken into account.

Staff say they are well led and managed. There are very effective performance management systems in place to support their professional development. Engagement with children living in the area has increased significantly over the last two years. The centre engages with the majority (59%) of children and their families and significantly with those families identified as in greatest need. The inclusion of families from the wider community and those identified as most vulnerable due to their circumstances, is at the heart of the success of the centre. Collaborative and effective partnerships with a wide variety of agencies, including health, education, and private, voluntary and independent providers, play a key role in the accomplishments of the centre and the development of good quality provision across the locality.

The centre's safeguarding arrangements are thorough. Highly successful multi-agency working between key agencies ensures that child protection concerns are swiftly acted upon. Rigorous and effective recording systems enhance the centre's safeguarding practice. Recruitment procedures are very comprehensive, and include Criminal Records Bureau checks. All staff attend regular training to update their professional knowledge of child protection at least annually.

This is a very friendly and welcoming centre. Disabled children access high-quality early years provision and their individual needs are well met in partnership with other agencies. Those families identified with circumstances that make them vulnerable, asylum seekers, refugees, families living with domestic violence, families from minority ethnic groups, and disabled users, receive timely, sensitive and very effective support. In these cases, the interventions provided by the centre are having a significant impact on outcomes for the families, especially in relation to their confidence, self-esteem and emotional well-being. As a result of the positive provision, and the strong leadership and management, outcomes for the majority of families are good overall. The centre provides 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 effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secures improvement in outcomes	2
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	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 partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services provided by the centre to meet its core purpose	2
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.	2

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

Alexandra Nursery School was inspected on 15/02/2012 and was judged to be outstanding. Alexandra Nursery School and Children's Centre was inspected 08/02/2012 and was judged to be outstanding.

Alexandra Under Three's Centre was inspected on 13/03/2012 and was judged to be good.

The full report of each of these settings is available on our website www.ofsted.gov.uk.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Alexandra Children's Centre on 30 and 31 January 2013. We judged the centre as good overall.

We would like to thank all of you who took the time to come in and meet with us and tell us about your centre. You told us that staff are always friendly and supportive and that they have helped you and your families a great deal. We found the centre to be a very welcoming place where families are well supported. Staff show high levels of professionalism and concern for families and they work very effectively with each other, and with trusted and specialist partners, to meet the needs of children and families throughout the area.

It is to the credit of families, staff and their partners that the centre is such a vibrant, welcoming and inclusive place. Families are welcomed into the centre, whatever their circumstances, and are always sure of a warm greeting from staff – sometimes in several community languages. Importantly, parents say the centre is a safe place for them and their children. The centre staff all contribute to ensuring your safety and security and any concerns about children's and families' welfare are quickly identified and appropriate action taken to safeguard individuals.

We were impressed with the way the centre and its partners are supporting good outcomes for you and your children, especially in the Early Years Foundation Stage and in health. In the early years, children in need of additional support, for instance, those new to English, make good progress in their learning. As a result, children who access the high-quality play and learning activities provided at the centre and via key partners, are significantly better prepared for school and beyond.

The centre is providing you with important support in times of difficulty. Staff are very effective at meeting your individual needs and working with you to improve your circumstances. We can see how many of you are developing your confidence and skills as parents, and as citizens of Great Britain, as a result of attending the good range of courses, workshops and activities at the centre and at other settings in the locality.

It is not always clear how many of you are improving your employment opportunities and financial independence as a result of your involvement with adult education and Jobcentre Plus partners. We have asked the centre to make use of the available information to assess what difference the good range of support and personal and professional learning opportunities is making to families and how they are supporting the economic well-being of families.

No parents from the centre are currently serving on the advisory board. Centre leaders are eager to develop opportunities for you to become more involved in the governance and decision-making processes. We have also asked that the parents' forum is advertised more widely to encourage new membership, and for information from the parents' forum to be fed on to the advisory board.

Thank you again for helping us with the inspection. It was good to meet you all and we wish you all the very best for the future.

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