

Inspection report for Austin House Children's Centre

Local authority	Sunderland City Council
Inspection number	367865
Inspection dates	6-7 July 2011
Reporting inspector	Joan Cawdron

Centre governance	The local authority
Centre leader	Susan Ord
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Centre address	Austin House Family Centre, 22 Shakespeare St., Southwick, Sunderland, SR5 2JX.
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Linked school if applicable	Southwick Primary School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	New Beginnings Day Care Nursery

The inspection of this Sure Start Children's Centre was carried out under Part 3A of the Childcare Act 2006 as inserted by section 199 of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009.

Introduction

The inspection addresses the centre's contribution to:

- facilitating access to early childhood services by parents, prospective parents and young children
- maximising the benefit of those services to parents, prospective parents and young children
- improving the well-being of young children.

The report is made to the local authority and a copy is sent to the children's centre. The local authority may send the report to such persons it considers appropriate and must arrange for an action plan to be produced in relation to the findings in this report.

An inspection of Southwick Primary School, maintained nursery school and New Beginnings Day Care Nursery was carried out at the same time as the inspection of the centre under Section 5 of the Education Act 2005. The report of this inspection is available on our website www.ofsted.gov.uk.

This inspection was carried out by one additional inspector and an early years inspector. The inspectors held meetings with representatives from the local authority, members of the advisory board, a broad range of users and a number of partners, including those representing health and social care organisations. They observed the centre's work and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

Austin House Children's Centre is a phase one children's centre designated in March 2006, based on the site of Southwick Primary School. There are nine super output areas in the children's centre area, the majority of which fall into the top 20% of the most deprived in the country. The centre serves the geographical area of Southwick and provides the full core offer. Outreach services are provided at a number of locations, including the Maplewood Centre, schools, nurseries, day-care settings, health centres, libraries and toddler groups. Within the reach area, there are significant social issues, such as unemployment, a significant number of families in receipt of benefits, low levels of literacy and numeracy and high levels of domestic abuse. Most children enter day care and early education with skills lower than those expected for their age. The population of families who live within the reach area of the centre is predominantly of White British heritage. There is a high concentration of social housing and private rented accommodation in the area.

It is one of three children's centres that form a cluster in the north locality of Sunderland. Governance of the centre is provided by the local authority in conjunction with an advisory board. The centre is linked to the on-site primary school and to other local primary schools.

Full day-care provision is delivered by the New Beginnings Nursery, which is located within the on-site primary school. The inspection report can be found at www.ofsted.gov.uk.

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

Austin House Children's Centre provides a warm, welcoming and safe environment for all its users. Parents and carers value the work it does and recognise the positive impact it has on their lives. One parent reflected the views of many and said, 'The support I have received from the centre has changed my life and helped me improve the way I manage my children's behaviour. They enjoy coming to the centre.' Multi-agency partnerships are strong and particularly responsive to meeting the needs of families. The centre provides a good range of services that are increasing the knowledge of parents and carers about healthy lifestyles and keeping their children safe. Breastfeeding is well supported through the centre, but the numbers of mothers initiating breastfeeding are low and have not improved over the last five years. All appropriate safeguarding policies and procedures are in place and up-to-date. Safeguarding is good and meets all legal requirements and ensures that all users feel safe at the centre.

Observations by inspectors, data scrutinised, evaluations conducted by the centre and case studies demonstrate that outcomes for users are good. The provision is also good. Parents and carers are developing their confidence, communication and self esteem through programmes of personal development at the centre. Through its partnership arrangements with working links and with Jobcentre Plus, the centre provides information on current job vacancies and support for preparing to return to work.

Particularly effective actions are taken to support many families and children who are made vulnerable by their circumstances. Those who require support in times of acute need or crisis are helped through close multi-agency working and the highly effective

support team. The numbers of families attending the centre are high, and the progress that children make is good.

Users contribute well to the parents' forum which has an increasingly important role in the development of the centre's activities. The advisory board, local authority and parents' forum provide some challenge for the centre to consistently develop their provision. However, targets set by the local authority are insufficiently challenging or specific to the centre. Data provided on the progress towards these goals is unreliable. The centre records reflect better engagement in all its activities than the information provided by the local authority suggests. The centre is inhibited in its planning to improve the health indicators related to breastfeeding, due to lack of strategic engagement with the centre by health authorities.

The centre provides good value for money. The collaborative culture, motivated staff and good user outcomes as well as its effective leadership and current knowledge of the needs of the area, through dialogue with users in the community, give it good capacity to improve further.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Develop communication with the health service trusts to devise a strategy to improve the numbers of mothers initiating and maintaining breastfeeding.
- Through dialogue with the local authority agree more aspirational and individualised targets for improving access to services by families in the reach area.
- Improve the data management system, provided by the local authority, to ensure the centre has access to accurate information about participation rates and outcomes, to better inform planning of services.

How good are outcomes for users?

2

Evidence from case studies and discussions with partners and parents and carers all reflect the very positive impact of partnership working to promote children's and families' emotional well-being and physical health across the centre's reach area. All groups that attend the centre, from a variety of backgrounds and age groups, work harmoniously together. The centre addresses effectively users' feelings of isolation and provides good opportunities for families to access a range of services and to begin to develop friendships. Many users positively comment on the community cohesion promoted by the centre. Users report that their confidence and self-esteem

have improved since attending the centre. Healthy eating sessions and the provision of healthy snacks in sessions promote greater awareness of the range of foods that are good for children’s long term health. Baby massage and Bosom Buddies provide very effective support to mothers in bonding with their babies. Smoking cessation support is provided to families and to those pregnant mothers who smoke. Immunisation rates for children are high and above local averages.

All services offered in the centre keep users safe. The centre’s good relationships with families and their children allow staff to identify any safety concerns within families and to intervene quickly and appropriately. The mental health outcomes for potentially vulnerable families, including those who have children with additional needs and those whose children are on child protection plans or for looked after children are particularly good. Staff have a good knowledge of the centre’s organisational procedures. When needs are identified staff use the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) well to ensure teams can be assembled quickly to support children and families. Case studies and discussions provide strong evidence that attending parenting programmes helps parents and carers form relationships and learn to trust others as appropriate. This enables them to improve their children’s communication skills, learning and behaviour. Families’ awareness of safety in the home has improved through their participation on First Aid programmes. Foetal monitors are provided to support the safety of babies.

Children are better prepared for nursery and mainstream school due to effective delivery of the Early Years Foundation Stage provision at the centre. Children are becoming inquisitive learners through well-planned play and learning experiences. Observations and records of progress are used well to monitor children’s development. Adults are offered education courses that help them develop their literacy and numeracy skills. The centre has positive relationships with the local authority’s job linkage programmes and Jobcentre Plus, who support families not only with job search, but also with benefits advice, family tax credits and in accessing job related training to increase their life chances and employment prospects.

Children’s behaviour throughout the centre is good. The centre staff promote a sense of belonging and respect for each other. As a result, users and staff fully enjoy their time spent in the centre. Crèche facilities provide opportunities for adults to attend training or advice sessions on topics, such as home safety and behaviour management.

These are the grades for the outcomes for users

The extent to which children, including those from vulnerable groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles	2
The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	2

The extent to which all users enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	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 care and professionalism with which staff carry out their work are exemplary and they provide powerful role models to users. They are often a first point of contact for parents and carers and are the key link to professionals in other agencies and organisations. They are well qualified and trained, particularly in safeguarding and child protection. A high proportion of staff have Early Years professional status. The centre works well with the Salvation Army with whom it shares the accommodation, although this does limit the amount of space generally available to the centre. In order to meet the needs of the community, centre staff deliver their services in a wide range of venues and during home visits.

Much of the work of the centre is aimed at supporting the most potentially vulnerable families in this area. The wide range of services on offer meets users' needs well. To promote children's learning outreach staff and the children's centre teacher are highly effective in promoting the Early Years Foundation Stage provision and focus particularly well on children's personal and emotional development, communication and language. Childminders attend the centre regularly and are well supported by the early years specialist team to develop their skills. Achievements are recorded and celebrated well, whether this is a small step in a very young child's development or an adult's progress in developing their language, literacy and numeracy skills. Services in the centre include a Toy Library where parents and carers can borrow toys or purchase low cost craft materials, and obtain home safety equipment through services provided at the centre by a local voluntary agency. Adults are encouraged to develop their employability skills through volunteering and some have achieved qualifications and accessed employment through their voluntary work. Outreach staff are particularly effective when working with potentially vulnerable families. Many times during the inspection, parents and carers who have experienced acute trauma in their lives, commented about the profound positive influence of the centre staff.

The centre staff are very experienced in using a wide range of assessment tools, such as the CAF to identify users' needs. Centre staff also play a critical role within the multi-agency team meetings. Outreach staff are vigilant and share information very effectively if they judge a child or family to be at risk of harm. The centre has been involved in a pilot project to break down barriers for lone parents in the reach area who were reluctant to access child care provision. Attitudes have now changed

and they are more confident to use the nursery provision provided by the centre. Play activities and learning programmes for children are led by an Early Years Foundation Stage consultant who provides support for the learning team ensuring a high level of expertise to all those delivering services, including the nursery and the child minders in the area.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

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	2

How effective are the leadership and management?

2

Governance and accountability arrangements are clear and well understood. Leaders and managers at all levels have a good understanding of the provision and know where improvements need to be made. This is reflected in their accurate self-assessment. The centre manager and headteacher of the primary school work well together to provide effective focussed support to families. Staff are supervised well and supported effectively to improve their practice through good performance management procedures and professional development opportunities.

Users' views are used well to shape developments and inform evaluations. Users are encouraged to offer their views through the very effective parents' forum. The forum has been successful in raising funds to provide additional outings and activities for families in holiday periods and has also received good support from local businesses. Members of the forum have been successful in writing bids to access financial support from the local Inspiration Fund, which helps voluntary and community groups to improve the lives of local children.

Partnerships have a very positive impact on the work of the centre. Some partners provide timely and relevant information to influence the development of the provision but this is not yet consistent across all providers. However, the local health trusts do not engage with the centre sufficiently to plan strategies to improve outcomes for breastfeeding rates. The centre's development plan responds well to local and some national priorities and initiatives effectively based on sound local knowledge. However, targets set by the local authority are insufficiently challenging and not

focused on the precise needs of the reach area. Value for money is good.

Leaders have created a culture within the centre where safeguarding is considered to be a high priority. All legal requirements are met and Criminal Records Bureau checks have been carried out for all staff and volunteers. Guidance is provided on the use of information and communication technology and flow charts outline the steps to be taken where child protection issues may be identified. Very effective team work, which includes strong links with the on-site primary school, empowers staff ensuring that children and families achieve well and have the same access to a good range of experiences, regardless of their backgrounds and disabilities.

Equality and diversity are promoted successfully. This is because all services are designed to engage users from the local area. Those with disabilities and mental health needs are very well supported through one-to-one personal support and also integrated into the development activities. Leaders are looking for ways to reach into the community and include all groups of users effectively. Membership of the advisory board is very well supported by many of the organisations who contribute to the commissioned service provision, and through parent representatives from the parents' forum. All partners expressed the rewarding nature and confidence about working with the centre to meet the needs of their community.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day to day management arrangements are clear and understood	2
The extent to which ambitious targets drive improvement, provision is integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community	3
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	2
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

None

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 Austin House Children's centre on 6-7 July 2011. We judged the centre as good overall.

Thank you for making us feel welcome and for taking the time to talk to us about your children's centre. Your views were very helpful to the inspection. We were impressed as soon as we entered the centre. It's a very child and family friendly centre. Many of you felt that being made welcome was very important and we agree.

The main job of the children's centre is to bring services for children and families together to act in your best interests. Austin House Children's Centre does this well. By working together with partners, such as health professionals, safety advisers, training providers and job search specialists, you are provided with a good range of support and courses. These ensure there are opportunities for you to learn how to lead a healthy life and to be more confident. There is a wide range of activities aimed at your children, like baby massage and making music, which also gives you the opportunity to meet other parents and carers. We fully understood when many of you told us that involvement with the centre had turned your life around.

We were impressed by how well the centre supports families experiencing particular challenges such as caring for children with severe medical conditions or who have lived with domestic violence. The centre has given them real hope for a better future. The staff have not forgotten dads too, and the centre provides opportunities for them to spend time with their children on Saturday mornings. It seems to us that centre staff know the community really well.

The people in charge of running the centre are doing a good job. The centre manager works extremely hard to make sure that everything the centre does for you will make a difference. She makes sure that everyone who works at the centre shares this strong commitment. We heard many examples from you about how the

staff are all making a real difference to your lives. The quality of individual support that is provided is high, and the range of activities that can be accessed either directly in the centre or elsewhere is good. The parents' forum listens to your comments on the services provided and also raises money to provide trips out and access to other fun activities in the centre.

The advisory board and senior leaders are committed to making a difference to your lives and the families in the local area. The local authority is also committed to supporting the services provided by the children's centre, but have not set sufficient challenge for the centre to continue to improve the services for you. We have asked local authority staff to work with the centre to create more specific targets for the centre's future work and to improve the quality of the information on how well the centre is meeting its targets. The centre monitors the impact of its services but we have asked staff to explore how they might hold discussions with the local health service trusts on how to encourage more mothers to breastfeed their babies.

We would like to wish you, your children and the families in Southwick the best for the future.

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