

Inspection report for Bell Lane Children's Centre

Local authority	London Borough of Barnet
Inspection number	386963
Inspection dates	28–29 February 2012
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Centre leader (Acting)	Ann-Marie Fletcher
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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Linked school if applicable	Bell Lane Primary School
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.

Report published: March 2012



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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.

An inspection of the co-located/partner primary school 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 an additional inspector and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the centre manager and staff, senior leaders of the school, representatives from the local authority, the governing body and the advisory board. They also spoke to partner agencies, such as the health services, parents and carers and other users of the centre.

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

Information about the centre

This phase two centre was designated in March 2008 and has full core offer status. It offers services in two satellite sites, the Kennedy Leigh and the London Jewish Family Centre. It is managed directly by the governing body of Bell Lane Primary School on behalf of the local authority. The acting centre manager is providing maternity cover. The centre is open 48 weeks of the year on weekdays from 8.00am until 6.00pm. It serves three local estates and the super output area is categorised as being among the 70% most deprived nationally.

Following the closure of almost 40% of the borough's children's centres, the local authority redefined the centre's reach area and it now includes 2,235 children under five. The proportion of White British families is 43% and the largest non-British groups are Eastern European and Black African. However, many families do not provide ethnicity data. There is a large Jewish community in the area. The percentage of children aged 0 to 4 living in households dependent on workless benefits is slightly higher than the national average and the number of eligible families benefiting from the childcare element of Working Tax Credit is similar to that

seen nationally. Children’s levels on entry to early years education across the reach area are 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

Bell Lane Children’s Centre provides a good service to families. The care, guidance and support families receive are outstanding. This is because staff are highly knowledgeable about the families who use the centre, enlist well-tailored support from specialist services and have excellent review procedures to follow up cases.

The range of services offered and the very full timetable of events mean that the centre is used to capacity and gives good value for money. Strong links with other partners such as the health services and the London Jewish Family Centre have encouraged large numbers to use the centre from across most of the target groups, including those identified as most in need of support. Consequently, outcomes are good across all areas and for all target groups. The majority of children in the nursery class of the link school have attended the children’s centre. They settle very well and make good progress. However, because links with other schools in the area, including those serving the Jewish community, are not as well established, not all children’s progress is tracked as robustly.

The warm welcome that families receive, the security of the building and the very high levels of trust families have in staff mean that everyone spoken to and surveyed by the centre’s annual questionnaire are very happy with the services offered and feel safe there. ‘They are so friendly but effective....real lifesavers’ was a parental view that reflected many. Families know that they will be listened to and their views taken into account to shape services, such as through the parents’ forum – ‘Bell Lane Buddies’. As a result, they make a positive contribution to the centre and feel very much a part of it.

The governing body and the advisory board review rather than challenge the centre’s self-evaluation and business plan. While both bodies fulfil their statutory duties, there

is a lack of clarity and depth in relation to how they challenge the centre. Senior leaders and managers have a clear and accurate understanding of the centre's strengths and areas for improvement and appropriate priorities have been identified. These are founded on a clear understanding of specific local needs based on partners' and families' views. Consequently, well-targeted provision designed to fill any gaps where there is a perceived need, such as in supporting families back into employment, is having an increasingly positive impact on the well-being of those it serves. All staff are enthusiastic, well trained and committed to continue to improve outcomes, and taking into account all of the above, there is a good capacity for sustained improvement.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Improve links with other schools in the reach area, particularly those for the Jewish community, so that all children's progress can be tracked.
- Strengthen the role of the governing body and the advisory board in their involvement with the centre's self-evaluation and business planning by:
 - ensuring a robust monitoring programme is set up
 - developing the links between the two bodies to ensure they fulfil their separate duties.

How good are outcomes for families?

2

Childhood obesity rates are only available borough wide and are similar to national averages. Sustained breastfeeding rates at 68% are well above those found nationally and immunisation rates are high. The highly effective links with the health services mean that large numbers access services via the children's centre. Baby clinics are very busy. A strong focus on being healthy through, for example, the Healthy Activities and Practices in Pre-school Years (HAPPY) project has had a positive impact on a large majority of families' understanding of how to keep themselves and their children healthy. The extensive use of the centre's and local outdoor areas has encouraged physical fitness. There are good outcomes for families with emotional or mental health problems through signposting to specialist services and attending courses to boost their self-esteem.

Emergency hospital admissions in the borough at 83 per 10,000 are below national figures. Paediatric first aid courses, visits from the Police Community Support Officer and events such as 'Road Safety Week' have all added to families' good understanding of how to keep their children safe. Families feel very secure in the centre and have total trust in staff who, in turn, are quick to pick up any safeguarding matters. As a result, the centre's full involvement in supporting those subject to child protection plans and the instigation of and participation in the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) has led to positive outcomes for many

children. There are currently no children subject to a child protection plan and only four children currently supported by the CAF arrangements.

The Early Years Foundation Stage results for the centre's reach area have increased significantly since 2009 and at 69.5% are now well above the national average. The achievement gap between the lowest 20% and the rest has held at around the national figure. Excellent planning for centre activities based on recognised early years' development, and high levels of support for parents and carers to help their children learn mean that children are well prepared for transition to school. A commonly held view is, 'It's a stepping stone for my baby going to school; it's going to be so easy for him.' Children's progress is tracked when they move to the link school and overall they make better progress than those who have not accessed the centre's services. High levels of enjoyment from adults and children are evident in all activities, such as in 'Stay, Play and Grow' and 'Inbetweens'.

Adult learning courses such as information and communication technology (ICT) and English conversation classes, which meet the needs of the many diverse ethnic groups, have had a positive impact on participants' achievements and on their economic well-being. The recently established Job Club has already had several notable successes in getting families job-ready and back into work. Similarly, the work of the Citizens Advice Bureau and benefits advice from other partners have had a positive impact on the financial circumstances of families from all target groups with lone parents being particularly well supported.

Children behave well in the centre and develop positive relationships, modelled well by staff. The centre has been particularly successful in engaging the diverse cultures in the community all of whom contribute to decision-making through the 'Bell Lane Buddies' and through having frequent opportunities to express their views. These are then fed through to the advisory board by family representatives. Volunteers not only provide substantial support at centre activities but have enhanced their knowledge and prospects by, for example, becoming Communication Ambassadors for the 'ICAN' children's communication project which has led them to further training as classroom assistants.

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	2

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	2
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How good is the provision?

2

The local authority's realignment of the reach area has had a significant impact on the children's centre's provision. For example, although a relatively small centre, the number of under-fives in the reach area is 2,235 and almost 75% of those who attend, although geographically closest to this centre, are technically not in the new reach area. This means that data on all of the target groups do not reflect a true picture of the work the centre is doing and the numbers who attend. Close analysis of the data shows that the centre is engaging well with all target groups, including those that have been identified as specifically in need such as the Jewish community. Participation rates from all target groups are high as services are constantly reviewed and adapted to meet needs, such as the provision of Kosher food at centre activities and meeting the needs of older children by putting on 'Toddler Read and Rhyme'. Although there are no specific groups for fathers, many are registered with the centre and attend activities and training such as ICT and Job Clubs.

Achievement is celebrated well through parties, awarding certificates and encouraging families to aspire to even more achievements such as participating in further training. Children's early learning and development are at the heart of all the well-planned activities, with some of the most vulnerable groups, for example children with speech and language delay or special educational needs, monitored and supported well. This leads to improved outcomes for those families.

Families who use the centre are unanimous in feeling that they receive excellent levels of care, guidance and support. This is especially so in times of crisis, such as under threat of homelessness, when staff make excellent use of the many strong partnerships that exist to give specialist help. 'I couldn't have coped without them,' was a common view. The work of the family support and outreach workers has been particularly successful in this aspect. The way that support for families is planned for and followed up through the 'Case Review and Allocation' meetings is highly effective and regarded as an exemplar to other children's centres in the borough.

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	1

How effective are the leadership and management?

2

The centre is very well organised and runs smoothly on a day-to-day basis because of frequent, rigorous monitoring and a very strong team ethos. While governance and accountability arrangements are adequately in place, and the governing body is regularly informed of the work of the centre, it is not yet fully involved in its strategic development. Key partners, such as the health services, are engaged effectively in supporting the centre and many are represented on the advisory board. The centre's business plan, produced as part of the local authority's monitoring, is comprehensive and although it sets appropriate targets it does not always use data effectively to measure impact. Nevertheless, the views of well-integrated key partners and families who use the centre are fully taken into account in planning for the future. Consequently, outcomes are good and improving.

Centre resources, including the well-trained staff, are managed very effectively with a packed timetable of events that are engaging the majority of families in target groups in the area. Families benefit substantially from the high quality service and resources including a well-planned outdoor area.

Families who use the centre reflect the community it serves to a great degree and it is highly inclusive. All show high levels of respect for each other and show an interest in others such as by including Hebrew songs in activity sessions and celebrating festivals from many cultures. This has led to improved engagement from target groups, including those who are particularly vulnerable or isolated. Links with 'IPOP' (providing support for disabled families) ensures disabled children's needs are met effectively. The provision of a crèche has had a very positive impact not only on increasing the numbers who can participate in courses but also on children's development as they learn to part happily from their parents and carers and can enjoy the wealth of resources available at the centre. As a result of concerted, targeted work, such as the Job Club and English conversation classes, the gaps between different groups are closing as families are given confidence to improve their lives through greater self-belief leading to a return to work or enhanced confidence in supporting their children.

Safeguarding policies and procedures are strong and staff are well trained, including in how to deal with issues of domestic violence and emotional health and well-being. All appropriate Criminal Records Bureau checks are carried out. Senior family support and outreach workers play an effective role in instigating CAFs because of their high level of knowledge of families' specific needs. Consequently, children's interests are safeguarded well and the numbers subject to these plans and to child protection plans are reducing significantly.

There are many strong, well-established partnerships in place that make a valuable contribution to outcomes. These include midwives and health visitors, Bookstart, the London Jewish Family Centre, Middlesex University childcare provision and childminders. All of these links meet the wide range of general and specific needs

and have a positive impact on outcomes for all target groups.

Outreach workers have been very effective in engaging families not only with the centre's services but also in how they have a strong voice in shaping future activities. All of those spoken to by inspectors and surveyed by the centre are very positive about what the centre has done for them and particularly in how well they and their children have been supported and the subsequent outcomes, many of which were described as 'life changing'.

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	3
The effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secure 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

Findings from the concurrent school inspection in relation to attainment on entry to the Early Years Foundation Stage, leadership and management, and safeguarding were taken into consideration.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Bell Lane Children's Centre on 28 and 29 February 2012. We judged the centre as good overall.

During our visit, we looked at your centre's business plan and numerous other documents. We spoke to a wide range of partner agencies working with the centre as well as staff, members of the governing body and the advisory board, and a representative from the local authority. We also visited the centre activities taking place during the inspection, such as 'Inbetweens' and 'Stay, Play and Grow' and spoke to a substantial number of families using the centre.

Thank you for your participation in the inspection. It was very helpful to have your input and to hear how positive you all feel about the centre and especially the commitment of the staff. Views that summed up those of many we spoke to were 'They are so friendly but effective...real life savers' and 'I couldn't have coped without them'.

We agree that the centre staff provide outstanding care, guidance and support and many of the partner agencies we spoke to also highlight this aspect as a strength of the centre's work. This is because staff have a high level of knowledge of your specific needs and you have built up very strong levels of trust in them to put in the right level of support. In addition, there are many effective partnerships in place that staff can call upon to give you very specific support tailored to your needs. Because staff are well trained and vigilant, and are quick to spot and act on any concerns, they are effective in ensuring children are safeguarded well. These features and the safe and welcoming environment, mean that you all feel secure there.

Many of you attend Bell Lane Children's Centre even though it is not your designated centre and the numbers who attend activities and courses are high. The centre has been especially successful in engaging with the Jewish community through strong links with the London Jewish Family Centre and sensitive to cultural needs. This has helped everyone in the community to come together and to respect each other. We have asked the centre to now look at extending these links to other schools in the area so that they can be developed to the extent that exists with Bell Lane Primary. This will mean that children who move on to other schools can also have their progress tracked.

Families are reaping the benefits of contact with the centre in many ways. For example, understanding how to lead healthy lives and how to keep your children safe and help them learn. Parenting courses that help improve confidence and skills, English conversation classes and the Job Club have all enabled many of you to gain confidence to return to work, achieve further qualifications or enhance your families' financial situation. Children make good progress not only in their learning but also in their personal development because activities are well planned around early learning by highly experienced staff. This means they are confident when they move on to

the next stage in the lives, and was summed up by one parent as 'a stepping-stone' for going to school.

Families feel very much a part of the centre and that their views are listened to. The 'Bell Lane Buddies' meetings give you a formal method to voice your views but you have many other opportunities to do so and your views are taken into account well to develop future activities and services. For example, 'Toddler Read and Rhyme' sessions were established to meet the needs of older children.

The centre is well led and managed on a day-to-day basis and there is an accurate understanding of its strengths and areas for development. However, the governing body and advisory board are not yet fully involved in challenging the centre by regularly monitoring the business plan and self-evaluation. We have asked those responsible to ensure that the two groups work effectively together so that the centre is helped to provide an even better service.

The strong commitment of all staff and the impact they have already had on outcomes for a high proportion of families in the community, combined with outstanding care, guidance and support mean that the centre is well placed to continue to improve.

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