

# Inspection report for Ambler Children's Centre

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<b>Local authority</b>	Islington
<b>Inspection number</b>	383379
<b>Inspection dates</b>	29 February – 1 March 2012
<b>Reporting inspector</b>	Priscilla McGuire

<b>Centre leader</b>	Nicola Hayden
<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	Not applicable
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<b>Linked school if applicable</b>	Ambler Primary School
<b>Linked early years and childcare, if applicable</b>	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.

## Introduction

The inspection addresses the centre's contribution to:

- facilitating access to early childhood services by parents and carers, prospective parents and carers and young children
- maximising the benefit of those services to parents and carers, prospective parents and carers 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](http://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, the headteacher of the linked school, local authority staff, a wide range of representatives from partner organisations, for example adult education providers, the health professions and from local community and voluntary organisations. They also held meetings with parents. They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

## Information about the centre

Ambler Children's Centre is a phase one centre which was set up in 2006 and based in Islington in North London. The centre shares its site with Ambler Primary School and operates from buildings that have been adapted for use. The local authority governs the centre and is supported by an advisory board which is responsible for Ambler and two other centres within a cluster of three. The centre is open for 48 weeks per year and daily from 8.00am to 6.00pm. Services on offer include early years education, health provision, adult learning courses, counselling services, outreach support and nursery provision. Some services for families are delivered across the cluster at different locations, but most provision is offered from the Ambler Centre.

The children centre's reach area is ethnically and socially diverse with pockets of affluence and also of deprivation. Significant numbers of families speak Turkish, Somalian or Bengali as their first language. Approximately 35% of housing in the Ambler reach area is social housing and 65% private sector housing. Around 16% of

children from birth to four-years-old live in workless households and the most recent data indicate that about 20% of eligible families benefit from the childcare element of working tax credit.

Children's levels on entry to the Early Years Foundation Stage are lower than what would normally be expected.

## 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

Ambler Children's Centre is a good centre which serves its community of families well. It offers them an attractive, welcoming and comfortable environment which they appreciate. As one parent said, 'Sometimes I just want an excuse to come here.' Staff are passionate about improving the life chances for families. They work effectively with a wide range of partners to achieve that aim.

The support, care and guidance offered to families are outstanding. Staff approach the diverse range of problems that affect families in a sensitive and individualised way. They help parents gain the confidence to talk about their problems, to work with the centre to develop effective coping skills and then take action to change what in their lives can be improved.

The centre manager is strongly committed to providing good quality early years education. Data demonstrate the positive impact of the centre's work on the results for children across the Early Years Foundation Stage. This is in part due to the centre manager's strong focus on rigorous assessment and recording of children's progress to ensure that the individual needs of each child are well met.

Diversity is celebrated and equality strategies are effectively implemented. Activities such as the Somalian coffee morning have proved to be effective in engaging families who have previously not attended the centre. The safety of families is also a priority of the centre's work and staff have a good understanding of what action needs to be taken when safeguarding concerns arise.

Leadership and management of the centre are good. At all levels, the needs of the community are well understood and there is a shared commitment from leaders, managers and partners to improving outcomes for families.

'I just wanted to do something to make a difference' was the comment from one parent who volunteers at the centre. Others have made a similar commitment through their roles as advisory board members, group volunteers or in their roles as Parent Voice group members. Although parent representation on the advisory board is good, it does not yet fully reflect the diversity of the centre's families.

Leaders and managers are highly competent and have a good understanding of the centre's strengths and areas of improvement. The quality of written feedback on individual activities is often good but in some cases lacks sufficient qualitative evidence of impact. However, overall, self-evaluation is an effective process which is supported by the work of a Children's Centre Improvement Partner (CCIP) and leads to improvement. In addition, the good quality leadership and management mean that the centre has good capacity to improve.

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

### **Recommendations for further improvement**

- Implement strategies to increase the diversity of parents who sit on the advisory board.
- Ensure greater consistency in the quality of evaluative feedback from all individual activities.

## **How good are outcomes for families?**

<b>2</b>
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Ambler Children's Centre contributes well to the improving health of its community. Through a concerted effort by staff and effective partnership work, breastfeeding and immunisation rates are higher than the average for the borough. For example breastfeeding rates at six to eight weeks are 84%. Obesity rates for the reach area are reducing and the centre has increased parents' understanding of how to create healthy meals for their families. Through its partnership work with professionals, for example midwives, clinic psychologists and health visitors, the centre actively promotes the emotional health and resilience of many parents. This then enables them to progress to accessing other centre services and they become better skilled in supporting their children's development.

Parents feel very safe because of the commitment of staff to making the centre a safe place to be. They also feel safe because the centre prioritises safeguarding. Staff use the Common Assessment Framework well to identify families' needs. They also offer targeted intervention and services to families who are vulnerable because of their circumstances. Parents from one of the centre's key target groups of Black

and minority ethnic groups, have made an enthusiastic response to the opportunity to have their homes assessed for safety and as a result have safer homes. Good parenting support for families with children subject to child protection plans and for children in need, has helped parents progress from being referred for targeted services to accessing universal provision.

Through well-structured activities and a strong focus on their individual needs, children make good progress from their starting points. Effective partnership work with early years professionals is productive in helping children develop their knowledge and skills and make a good transition to school. Early Years Foundation Stage scores for children in the reach area are higher than those for the rest of the borough but 2011 scores are slightly lower than the average for England. The trend over the last three years has been a narrowing of the gap between the bottom 20% of achievement and the rest.

Parents also make good progress at the centre. Their participation in a range of activities leads to raised aspirations, significant improvements in their parenting skills and their overall personal development is good. Parents who speak English as an additional language make good progress in developing English language skills and gain qualifications, for example English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). As one parent said, 'Before, when I went in shops I had to point at what I wanted; now I can ask for things.'

Children behave well at the centre and parents comment on their improved behaviour since they started attending the centre. They are also developing good social skills for the future. Through their voluntary roles on the advisory board and the Parent Voice group, parents contribute well to decision making and governance. Parents also volunteer in other ways by working as peer mentors for breastfeeding or to support different activity groups. However, the representation of parents on the advisory board does not yet fully reflect the ethnic diversity of users of the centre.

Although links with Jobcentre Plus are minimal, the centre works well with a local organisation to provide good employability training and guidance which helps parents develop effective job search skills. Some parents have progressed into employment and over a third of parents are involved in some form of adult learning or training. Economic stability has also been increased for parents through work by centre staff and its partners to provide good benefits advice. Data show that in 2011, the impact of the effective guidance parents received about their benefits entitlement led to an annual financial increase of around £47,000 for families.

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>2</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?**

<b>2</b>
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The assessment of community needs and of the needs of individual families is good. Through careful data analysis, staff identified which target groups were not engaging as well as others and took corrective action. For example, outreach work on a housing estate has led to increased registration rates of some of the harder-to-reach groups within the area. The centre's engagement with key target groups of families who are young parents, lone parents, from Black and minority ethnic groups or whose circumstances make them vulnerable is good. Services are well matched to needs to provide a good balance between universal and targeted provision. Overall registration rates of 70% and participation rates at 54% demonstrate the centre's success in engaging well with its local community and in matching provision to need.

Opportunities for learning are good and activities are well organised and linked to priorities for both children and adults. The quality of provision for children is greatly enhanced by the centre's rigorous assessment and monitoring of the individual skills and development of children. In response to identified priorities around language development, good partnership work with speech and language therapists through programmes such as 'Little Leaps' helps to develop children's language skills, particularly for those who are at risk of language delay. Opportunities for parents to develop their learning through accredited courses such as ESOL and through good quality parenting programmes are also good.

'I hibernated for a whole year, but the centre gave me the confidence to come out again' was the comment from one parent about the support the centre offered. Another said, 'It's just good to have someone on your side, fighting your corner.' These comments are just a few of the overwhelmingly positive views parents have of the excellent support they receive. Many comments from parents reflect the 'emotional warmth' they feel the centre offers. This helps them to feel valued and more confident about the future. Although the centre does not immediately change the circumstances of families, it equips parents with the skills to cope better with problems. Through excellent working with other agencies, the centre is able to minimise or in some cases remove some of the barriers families face. As a result of the excellent support they receive, parents are empowered and gain the confidence to take positive and decisive actions to improve the quality of their own lives and that of their children.

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>
<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>1</b>

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

<b>2</b>
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Staff morale is very high at the centre and staff are well respected by parents, partners and others who come into contact with them. Leaders and managers at all levels within the centre, the local authority and the advisory board are very competent and confidently carry out their responsibilities. Through an effective leadership and management structure, the centre is held to account. The local authority is diligent in its approach to providing data and its analysis. Centre staff regularly scrutinise data to monitor participation rates and the impact of provision.

Evaluation is an effective process which leads to a development plan and priority setting which includes measurable targets. The process of self-evaluation is enhanced through the support and challenge to the centre from its CCIP, which helps the centre identify its strengths and areas for improvement. All centre activities are evaluated and the quality of many evaluations is good. However, some evaluations focus too much on quantitative evidence rather than provide qualitative evidence of impact.

Representation of partners on the advisory board is good and they work very well with the centre. As one health professional said, 'We join forces to better children's lives.' Through a structure of multi-agency meetings and area support teams meetings, partners are actively involved in strategic and operational development and review of the centre's activities. Accommodation and resources are of good quality and are well used. Staffing resources are also well deployed. This together with the good outcomes for families means that value for money is good.

Communication is effective and staff meetings are used well to highlight safeguarding issues and to ensure that good outcomes for families remain a priority for the centre's work. Safeguarding is actively promoted and early intervention and early referral are effective strategies which help to keep children and families safe. Through effective multi-agency work, the centre provides good support to families affected by domestic violence. Staff are appropriately trained in safeguarding. Safer recruitment procedures, which include Criminal Records Bureau checks on staff and volunteers, are a rigorous process which is externally audited to ensure statutory requirements are met well.

Data for the Early Years Foundation Stage show that the centre is successfully narrowing the gap between children from Black and minority ethnic groups and others who attend the centre. The centre has also reached most children in the area who are disabled and supported them in accessing provision and also signposted them to other professionals for specialist support. Equality is actively promoted and diversity celebrated through different activities which show the centre's respect for its diverse community. For example, the employment of a bilingual support worker who speaks Somalian has helped to raise participation rates of families from that community.

Parents' views, and those of the wider community, are captured through the Parent Voice group and through surveys and routine consultation during the centre's annual summer and autumn fairs. 'You're not just treated as a parent but as a member of the centre' was the view from one parent which is typical of many.

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>2</b>
<b>The effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secure 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>2</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**

Findings from the concurrent inspection of Ambler Primary School.

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](http://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](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk).

## Summary for centre users

We inspected the Ambler Children's Centre on 29 February and 1 March 2012. We judged the centre as good overall.

Like you, when we visited your centre, we found it to be a very welcoming place. You told us how much staff have helped you through some of the most difficult times of your life. We appreciate your honesty in telling us a little about your lives and demonstrating to us the positive way the centre has helped you to overcome barriers.

We know that your centre has not been able to make your problems disappear altogether but what impressed us was the excellent support staff offer to help you cope with those times in life when you need a listening ear or a shoulder to cry on or someone to point you in the right direction. This is exactly what centre staff have done for so many of you and this has enabled you to benefit from the wide range of activities offered at the centre for families, for example the 'stay and play' activities for children or the parenting courses for adults.

The quality of activities that are available for families at the centre and at other venues is good. You told us how much you and your children enjoy attending the various activities offered. We could see from the data we looked at that children are making good progress with their learning and development.

The staff work well with other professionals, for example those from health and those who specialise in teaching young children. They also work well with organisations that have helped some of you to improve your English language skills. This is something we know you appreciate because you told us how being able to speak better English has increased your independence.

We agree with you about the way the centre welcomes families from all sorts of backgrounds and who live in a whole range of different circumstances. We found that your centre is good at ensuring everyone has an equal chance of benefiting from what is offered. Your centre also offers a safe environment for families and this again is something you told us you value. We know that safeguarding of families is something that is a high priority for staff.

It was a pleasure to meet some of you who volunteer in different ways at the centre. We know you appreciate the opportunity you have to get involved in the way things are done. We would like to see more parents and carers from a range of backgrounds represented on the advisory board so we have asked the centre to look at ways of making sure this happens. We have also asked centre staff to make sure that the feedback they collect about all activities is of good quality and provides enough detail about impact.

Once again, we want to thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us during the inspection. We wish you and your families all the best for the future.

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