

Inspection report for Abbey Children's Centre

Local authority	Merton
Inspection number	366838
Inspection dates	9–10 February 2011
Reporting inspector	Jo Caswell HMI

Centre governance	Local Authority
Head of Centre	Stella Fry
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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Linked school if applicable	Merton Abbey Primary School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	

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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 a Senior Inspector (Early Years).

The inspectors held meetings with senior leaders, representatives from the Advisory Board, the local authority and partnership agencies; and members of staff and centre users.

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

Inspection judgements

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

Information about the centre

Abbey Children’s Centre is located on the site of Merton Abbey Primary School in the borough of Merton. The centre is a Phase 2 centre and has been designated since November 2007. The centre delivers the full core offer of services. Provision is integrated and a number of programmes and activities are also delivered through commissioned services. The Head of Centre is also the headteacher of Merton Abbey primary School. The centre is managed on a day-to-day basis by a Centre Coordinator who works very closely with the Head of Centre. Governance arrangements are provided through an advisory board and support from the local authority.

Abbey Children’s Centre is located in the Abbey ward, on the west side of the borough. Abbey is one of the least deprived wards in Merton but does have one of the areas of greatest need. There are 1246 children aged under five years in the reach area, of which 159 live in the areas considered to be the most deprived. The centre serves an exceptionally mixed area. Neighbouring areas consist of affluent, privately-owned housing alongside densely populated residential estates where there are large numbers of over-crowded homes. The majority of families are of White British heritage, although there are increasing numbers of families who speak English as an additional language. Unemployment levels are below local authority and London averages, as are the numbers of families claiming benefits. Children’s levels on entry to Early Years Foundation Stage provision are slightly above those skills expected for their age.

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

Abbey Children's Centre provides good quality services and knows its community well. The centre is extremely welcoming to all users and offers a friendly, safe and accessible environment. Safeguarding arrangements are good. Centre staff go out of their way to ensure all users are instantly made welcome and greeted warmly. The highly effective outreach work in the community is having a positive impact on engaging with the harder to reach families. As a result, some groups and activities are now running at full capacity. These groups provide good opportunities for parents and carers to seek information from professionals and to make new friends and develop their confidence. Many centre users informed inspectors of the benefits they had gained from attending activities at the centre. This was particularly evident for parents and carers who had been supported emotionally by centre staff. One parent told inspectors, 'I would have gone insane without the centre.' Another parent told inspectors, 'I would be lost without the centre.'

A key strength of the centre is the way in which partner agencies work together to deliver a cohesive set of services. All partners and front line staff who spoke to inspectors complimented the centre's leadership and management. One member of staff who works across the borough's children's centres described this centre as 'brilliant'. Staff praised the way in which their services have reached more families now they are delivered from the centre. This is having a positive impact, particularly on improving health outcomes for families. Centre staff and health professionals work consistently hard to promote healthy lifestyles through information, support and designated activities, such as healthy eating courses.

The care, guidance and support offered to families are good. Staff are keen to listen to parents and carers and signpost them effectively to additional services. Consequently, those who are introduced to the centre through outreach work and home-based support are keen to benefit from further services. There is good support available for children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and for children of disabled parents.

Children make good progress in their learning and development. Staff help parents and carers understand the value of active, purposeful play. 'Stay and Play', 'Time for Tots' and 'Messy Play' sessions are all popular and provide good opportunities for parents and carers to engage in play with their children and develop ideas to extend at home. Learning and development opportunities are good for parents and carers.

The leadership and management of the centre are good. There is good team work and close communication between the Head of Centre and the Centre Coordinator. They support one another well and both share a commitment to consistently identify ways to support the local community. As a result, the centre's capacity to improve is good. The centre's self-evaluation is sound and based on secure monitoring procedures. Data regarding the centre's reach area and numbers of families it is reaching are analysed closely by the local authority and shared with the centre.

However, the procedures for linking this into action plans are not yet fully embedded. All activities are regularly evaluated and the centre routinely seeks the views of parents and carers. However, there are few opportunities for children to share their views and help shape future services.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Review the use of data to ensure this is used more robustly by the centre and consistently linked to action-planning and self-evaluation.
- Strengthen the current procedures for evaluating provision by seeking the views of children.

How good are outcomes for users?

2

The centre is having a positive impact on improving outcomes for families. As a result, all outcomes are good. The promotion of healthy lifestyles and supporting emotional well-being are central to all services. Health professionals, such as midwives and health visitors, deliver services and clinics directly from the centre. As a result, they note an increase in attendance at ante-natal and post-natal clinics. The centre offers good support to promote breastfeeding and mothers told inspectors they have continued with breastfeeding for longer, as a result of the information and support they have been given. One parent told inspectors, 'I would have given up breastfeeding by now if it wasn't for the support I get from the centre.' Parents and carers say they have a better understanding of providing healthy meals for their children as they have attended sessions, such as 'Fun Food Factory'. Centre users say how better informed they are of managing accidents and promoting children's healthy development as they have completed relevant courses, such as first aid, food hygiene and safeguarding, and attended smoking cessation groups.

All services within the centre ensure children stay safe. Families have positive relationships with staff and approach them at any time for guidance and support. As a result, staff know the families well and can quickly identify any concerns. Case study evidence shows parents have access to good quality parenting courses and support with behaviour management issues, helping to improve relationships within the family. One parent stated the course had enabled her to be 'calmer as a parent and enjoy my children'. Early intervention strategies ensure children are protected effectively against harm. Children on the child protection register and looked after children are monitored closely and those involved with a Common Assessment Framework are supported well. Parents and carers state they feel safe and secure within the centre. They praise the Centre Coordinator for the support she offers, particularly when they are feeling vulnerable or experiencing crisis. Imaginative strategies help children understand how to stay safe. For example, practical activities with 'Debra the Zebra' help children understand road safety issues. Visits from the

emergency services and good relationships with the local police officers and neighbourhood warden encourage parents and carers to seek help where necessary and report any concerns.

Children are well prepared for nursery and school as they benefit from a wide range of stimulating play experiences. A suitable programme to improve children’s speaking, listening and writing skills has effectively identified those who require additional support. This has had a positive impact on children’s learning. Educational courses for adults are of good quality with increasing success rates in improving levels of literacy, numeracy and routes into further education and employment.

The centre is an integral part of the community and relationships between all users are positive. Parents and carers appreciate the centre’s work and feel able to express their own ideas for development. They routinely give feedback and the ‘You Said, We Did’ board shows how well the centre listens to them. However, there are fewer opportunities for children to share their views.

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, and 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 and employment.	2

How good is the provision?

2

The centre has firmly established procedures for assessing the needs of children and their families. Effective multi-agency working and integration of services ensure close liaison between all professionals and good signposting to relevant support and information. Outreach services are good and are consistently reaching more families including those identified as being vulnerable. The centre is well established within the local community and uses venues such as church halls, the local theatre and library to extend its services and reach as many families as possible. Recently the centre has worked on developing play services in a new residential area where it

recognised there is very little provision for children. During school holidays, the centre consistently takes activities out into the community. Parents tell inspectors how much their children look forward to the holiday activities and one stated, 'my kids love it'.

Targeted support services help to ensure all families are included. For example, there is good provision to support adults and children who speak English as an additional language. Due to an increase in Tamil families, a Tamil speaking support worker helped to engage these families into the centre. Lone parents are supported well and a designated Lone Parent Advisor from Job Centre Plus works closely with these parents to offer information on applying for benefits and seeking employment. The recent increase of Job Centre Plus sessions at the centre has enabled more parents and carers to access these services. Further commissioned services help parents and carers to seek advice on housing issues, health information and support in applying for early years funding. An effective volunteer programme has enabled some parents and carers to undertake further training and be qualified to facilitate groups within the centre. Some parents and carers have completed accredited training and obtained qualifications. This has enabled them to be successful in gaining employment. For example, three parents and carers have completed recognised early years qualifications and have been successful in gaining employment as crèche workers as part of Pre School Learning Alliance.

The weekly childminder drop-in group enables childminders to work together professionally and to share best practice. The lead childminder offers good leadership and enables childminders and nannies to network together and benefit from additional early years training.

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 arrangements are secure at all levels and there are clear lines of accountability in place. Members of the advisory board, including representatives from the school governing body, fully embrace the centre's aims and objectives and

value the centre as an integral part of the school. Effective leadership and management ensure all accountable agencies work together to improve outcomes for families. Safeguarding arrangements are given good priority and robust measures are in place to protect centre users. The premises are fully secure and staff are vigilant in maintaining a safe environment. Rigorous recruitment procedures are in place to ensure all staff and volunteers are appropriately checked and cleared to work with children. The centre is fully committed towards supporting the emotional well-being of centre users and staff are specifically trained in supporting victims of domestic violence and vulnerable families. Effective integration of services ensures concerns relating to children and families are identified early and relevant referrals are made. Good links with other agencies ensure the centre is fully involved in the [Common Assessment Framework](#). This has led to a reduction in the number of children needing child protection plans. Looked after children are supported well and staff liaise closely with other agencies to support the individual needs of the child.

Equality and diversity are supported well throughout the centre. The inclusion of all children and their families is central to the centre’s vision and relevant measures are taken to ensure that activities, information and support are provided to meet individual need. For example, the centre recognises there are a significant number of families who speak English as an additional language, so English language classes are continually promoted throughout the centre. Children with disabilities are supported well and groups are established to offer specialist support, such as the provision of a sensory group. The centre is working hard to narrow the achievement gap between all groups. These measures are effective as the school’s Early Years Foundation Stage Profile data show the gap between the most disadvantaged children and other children is reducing each year.

The local authority maintains close analysis of the data relating to the centre and the numbers of families it continues to reach. Centre staff have access to this data and use this informally to target areas, although this is not yet fully embedded into the self-evaluation process and action planning. However, the centre knows its reach area very well and its capacity to improve is good. The improvement in outcomes for all families is reflective of the centre’s good value for money. User engagement is positive and parents and carers are invited to evaluate the impact of services they receive. Although this is routine for adults, it is not yet established for children.

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	2
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	3
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	3

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Abbey Children's Centre on 9-10 February 2011. We judged the centre as good overall.

The centre offers a warm and welcoming environment for families. Many centre users told us how much they enjoy visiting the centre and how they have benefited from the services provided. We were impressed by the close relationships between staff at the centre and staff from a wider range of professional groups. They work together well because they understand each other's roles and are willing to get the best possible advice and support for you. Health visitors, midwives, family support and outreach teams were all praised for the way in which they help you to make improvements to your lifestyle and to improve the health of your families.

Many of you told us how much the centre has supported you when you have needed advice and guidance. A large number of you told us how supportive the Head of Centre and Centre Coordinator are. Many of you said you are confident the centre will always help you when you are experiencing difficult times. Several of you told us about the good support you receive from staff in helping you sort out financial difficulties or when you need information about housing, applying for benefits, accessing training and job hunting.

The centre offers a safe and secure environment and all the appropriate checks are done to ensure staff are suitable to work with children. The centre helps you to recognise dangers and understand how to keep your children safe. Children make good progress in their learning as the centre offers fun, purposeful activities which

enable you to engage in play with your children. This helps you to try new ideas and games at home which helps to promote children's learning. We noticed there were some good strategies being used to help support children's language development and imaginative opportunities for boys to develop their writing skills through dance and music.

We noticed how much you felt the centre was part of your community and helps you to make friends. It is good to see the centre often asks for your views and thoughts and uses these to make changes and improve services. We have asked the centre to ensure that children have opportunities to share their views and ideas too.

The senior staff lead and manage the centre well and they know what to do to make further improvements. Although they have some data, they do not use this consistently and we have asked them to look at this data more closely to help them measure the improvements they are making to your services.

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

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