

Inspection report for The Avenue Children's Centre

Local authority	Merton
Inspection number	367866
Inspection dates	14–15 July 2011
Reporting inspector	Wendy Simmons

Centre governance	The West Wimbledon Children's Centre Joint Advisory Board
Centre leader	Anita Saville and Centre Manager Kirsty Jeffrey
Date of previous inspection	N/A
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Linked school if applicable	Joseph Hood Primary School
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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 additional inspector and one early years inspector. The inspectors held meetings with the centre leader, the senior leadership team, staff and representatives from the local authority. Discussions were also held with a range of health service workers. Inspectors also held a meeting with members of the Advisory Governing Board. Inspectors talked to parents and other users of the centre. They observed the centre's work and looked at a range of documentation, including evaluations of services, safeguarding policies and procedures, case studies, other records, development plans and the centre's annual review report.

Information about the centre

The Avenue is a Phase 2 Children's Centre, which opened in 2008. It works as a locality model with The Bridge Children's Centre, which opened in January 2010. The Avenue took over the running of the Bridge in June 2010. This report focuses on the for The Avenue Children's centre. The centre also works closely with The Bridge and other children's centres in close proximity. The centre serves the needs of families in the immediate reach area and beyond. In total, 74% of families come from the reach area. There are just over 900 families registered with the centre. Most families come from the Borough of Merton, although some come from Kingston and Wandsworth because the centre is just on the border.

The centre is governed by a Joint Advisory Board, which is made up of staff from the centre, the headteacher of Joseph Head Primary School and representatives of the school's governing body. Other members of the board include representatives from Jobcentre Plus, the library, a family information guidance adviser, parent forum representatives, health professionals and the lead childminder for West Wimbledon.

Some services are provided under a service level agreement with the local authority. The centre meets all elements of the core offer, which include integrated childcare, health services, family support and outreach along with a wide range of other services including, family and childminder drop-in and a range of parenting and training courses. Family support, which also links to housing and debt advice, is

integrated into the help offered. Courses are run for English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). A range of antenatal and postnatal support, including breastfeeding as well as mental health and well-being support, is provided.

The centre is managed on a day-to-day basis by a manager and her team of staff. They work closely with the local authority 0–12 Supporting Families Team. A qualified teacher also works with the centre staff.

The centre operates for 50 weeks of the year from 9.00am to 4.30pm from Monday to Friday. Additional activities are provided in school holiday times, in which older children can join. Prospective parents and those with newborn and older children may attend the centre as well as wider family members and local childminders. Children, from the age of birth to five years, are admitted to the child care crèche when parents and/or carers are attending training courses or need additional support to attend meetings.

The centre’s reach area covers pockets of deprivation, although a high proportion of parents and carers come from more advantaged backgrounds. There is a lower than average proportion of lone families, teenage mothers and families not in work. Only a small proportion of families are identified as being very hard pressed and/or in workless families and receive high levels of child tax credits. The centre works closely with a local refuge where families go for help having faced domestic violence.

Over 25% of families are from minority ethnic backgrounds and many of these speak English as an additional language. When children join the centre their levels of attainment are often lower than would normally be expected in terms of their language, communication and social skills. A low percentage of children have special educational needs and/or disabilities but, within this, their difficulties can often be complex and multiple. The centre also welcomes parents and carers with special educational needs and/or disabilities. The centre is based in a small one-storey portable building, which has a garden area. The centre will be moving into larger accommodation next year. The garden is being redeveloped over the summer.

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

The Avenue is a good and very popular children's centre that provides overall outstanding value for money. It is well run by a leader who has high expectations. Teamwork is very impressive. All staff have the very specific needs of the families at the heart of their work. Families become more confident and able to cope with the challenges of parenthood and gain new skills. The environment, although cramped, is very conducive to good learning and development. Exciting plans are in place to move into new accommodation next year. This will enable the centre to expand the range of indoor and outdoor activities and is an important development in the drive to become outstanding in the future. Impressive links with health care, social and educational professionals have a very positive impact on the good outcomes for families.

Interesting activities lead to good learning, fun and enjoyment for children, parents and carers. Children's all round development is good. Leaders are ambitious to make learning and development outstanding. While the diverse range of outreach services greatly enrich the provision, leaders recognise that when they move into the new accommodation they will be able to provide an even greater variety of on-site learning activities. Nonetheless, adults are already working effectively to help parents and carers to understand how to support their children in so many ways, for example in enhancing their social skills, adoption of healthy lifestyles and learning how to communicate with others. To make this outstanding there is a continuing emphasis on helping parents and carers to engage with their children to very best effect.

Parents and carers are wholeheartedly supportive of the work of the centre. A common expression is that the centre is 'brilliant'. Many spoke about how it has helped draw the community together. Parents agree that the centre helps them to feel less isolated and provides them with a sense of well-being. As one put it, 'We use the time to share ideas and overcome problems with the wonderful help of the staff.' Opportunities for adults to improve their education and skills are good. This is especially so for those who are learning to become childminders as well as those who are learning to speak English as an additional language. The centre is correctly focused on maintaining the improving links with lone parents and fathers, but there is more to do to strengthen this to very best effect.

The Joint Advisory Board works well as a team to plan improvements for the benefit of the families. The impact of its work is evident in children's attainment over the last two years, so that an average proportion are now working at the levels usually expected when they join local schools, this indicates a marked improvement. The centre is also successful in helping families to adopt healthy lifestyles as well as improving their economic and personal well-being. The centre is successfully narrowing the achievement gap between different groups of children and helping to promote good behaviour, positive attitudes to learning and a keen interest in basic skills. Families, including those who are vulnerable, are helped to overcome barriers to learning and worries. Finances are carefully targeted to the ever-changing needs of its users, which reflect leaders' good overall self-evaluation and the outstanding

assessment of individuals' needs. All these factors underpin the centre's good capacity for continued improvement. The health service provides effective day-to-day links with the setting and contributes much to the outstanding partnerships. However, although governance is good, it is only extremely recently that data about health matters, from the Primary Care Trust (PCT), have been available to further strengthen self-evaluation and target setting. As such, this aspect of governance remains an area for development in the drive to make the setting outstanding in the future.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Developing the use of the new accommodation to include the best possible range of indoor and outdoor activities and by maximising parents' awareness of how to engage in their children's play and learning so that outcomes are outstanding.
- Help more fathers and lone parents to be as involved in the centre as possible, so that their needs are fully met and outcomes become outstanding.
- Strengthen the use of health data about national health outcomes and how the centre compares with these.

How good are outcomes for users?

2

The centre's work is effective in helping families and their children to understand how to develop healthy lifestyles. The strong partnerships with midwives, health visitors and mental health support has resulted in a higher-than-average uptake of breastfeeding and a reduction in stress, depression and anxiety within families. The centre is effectively helping parents and carers to understand about the importance of oral health, which has resulted in a great reduction of use of dummies and use of healthier drinks. There is a good emphasis on healthy eating. For example, the 'Early Risers' breakfast is extremely popular. During the inspection, the children eagerly tucked into blueberries, strawberries, melon, yogurt and mini pancakes, as well as cereal. Parents are helped to enjoy cooking. They learn about basic nutrition when taking part in the 'Fun Food Factory'.

The work of the staff, health visitors and 'Early Support Team', contribute much to helping parents and carers to improve children's sleeping and behaviour. This in turn reduces stress in family homes very well. The impact of the 'Incredible Years' work is evident in the way that families become less isolated, more confident and able to cope better with mental health difficulties. Notably, vulnerable families are helped to stay together. It is not unusual for those who have received this support to have gained so much confidence that they will informally lead a new support group.

Leaders place a very high priority on providing workshops about first aid and being safe in the home. Very recent evidence, as provided by the health service, shows that the rate of admissions to accident and emergency in this reach is much lower

than in almost all of the other children's centres in the authority.

Children are safe and well protected because staff are caring and have established robust safeguarding procedures. 'Strengthening Families and Communities' case study information shows highly effective support for those who have experienced domestic violence. Families are given the guidance needed so that they can be kept together. Where this is not possible, the centre works very closely with the local refuge to help parents rebuild their lives. Outreach teams work directly with families in their homes. All agencies are effectively involved with families as part of the Common Assessment Framework process. High quality case studies feed well into good child protection plans so that child protection is robust.

Children enjoy learning in many different ways and make good gains in developing the skills needed for the future. Through focused support, and the freedom to explore things for themselves, children socialise well and learn quickly. Parents and carers commented on how much they value the messy play sessions and the effective 'Every Child a Talker' (ECAT) project. Activities such as these make learning fun as well as helping parents to communicate with ease with their children. As one parent explained, 'Messy play is just fantastic, I can not afford to do this at home.' While another said, 'It's just amazing, foam, sparkles, cornflakes and custard. My son does loves exploring the feel and we talk about it.'

Staff work well to help parents and carers to understand the importance of talking to their children as they do things. However, opportunities are still missed to make this as explicit as possible. The excellent partnership with the library, as well as opportunities for 'Rhyme Time' story sessions, is enabling adults to understand how to help the youngest children to enjoy books. Parents and childminders commented about how these sessions, as well as those about problem solving and counting, are helping them to understand how their children learn. They agree that these sessions provide the guidance needed for them to follow up activities at home. Children's attainment is rising well in basic skills. Adults are becoming increasing confident and self-reliant. For example, one of the childminders now leads a weekly 'Childminder and Parent Drop-in' with a particular focus on language development through rhythm, rhyme and story time. The numbers of parents and carers attending has increased enormously in the last year and the word about the importance of early language development is spreading well.

The support given for children and parents with special educational needs and/or disabilities is especially good and has improved in recent months due to outstanding assessment of needs and practical support. As a result, the outcomes for this group are also good. They are fully included in the life of the centre.

The centre staff have worked in a concerted way to help everyone to contribute more to the community. This was especially evident during the inspection when the wonderful 'Around the World Party' resulted in food being shared from such heritages as Columbia, South Africa, Asia, Spain and Italy.

The centre works effectively to ensure that users who speak English as an additional language can communicate their needs and views effectively and develop their basic English and health needs. For example, translators have been employed to aid the stop smoking pilot project where there has been a 50% reduction in smoking.

Childcare provision contributes much to the centre's success in helping parents to learn new skills to enable them to return to work. The centre has trained more than eight qualified childminders in recent times. As one parent put it, 'Having the centre helps us parents to get back to work'. There is a network of 37 childminders who meet regularly. As one childminder noted, 'Without the centre, I could not manage four children and that would mean that my friend would not be able to work.'

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

Parents greatly value the good care, guidance and support given to them, which helps them to be less anxious so that they enjoy being a family more. Very strong partnerships with health visitors, midwives, the 0-12 Supporting Families Team, the school and library are having a very beneficial impact on increasing the centre's outreach. Since opening, the centre has attracted more and more parents and carers to use the full range of services on offer. A comprehensive range of weekly activities is provided. These are well attended and meet the needs of children of all ages and their families.

Children have access to a diverse range of play and investigation activities through the outreach work and through links with different centres. The ranges of activities are fun, for example children enjoy climbing on a well-designed and safe mini climbing wall, which develops their concentration, perseverance and agility. Parents greatly value the 'Chitter Chatter Group'. As one explained, 'My child has come on in leaps and bounds, it's a real partnership helping our children's language development.' However, The Avenue is tight for space and this means that indoor and outdoor activities have to be very carefully rotated to give a wide range of

experiences over the week. Leaders have plans to make the new accommodation have greater flexibility. There will be further space for gardening, investigation outside, cookery and quiet areas, as well as more room for health consultation activities.

The centre's case studies reflect high quality care, guidance and support for families. Assessments of users' needs are very detailed and are extremely well documented. There are often individual plans for their support and regular evaluation of how well they are getting on, as well as detailed notes about the next steps for improvement.

Parents and carers confirm that they are helped with housing, benefit and other problems. As one explained, 'The staff were fantastic, really great in getting me help. I can talk to them now about anything. It has made a big difference to my life.' The 'Homestart' and 'Jigsaw4u' programmes contribute much to the integrated support.

Jobcentre Plus support is satisfactory; it has been reduced in recent months due to government financial cut backs. However, case study information shows that good support is provided to help parents and carers to gain education and work. This is often linked with benefit advice. For example, one parent was helped to set up her own business following training and guidance, whilst others have returned to such things as nursing or have embarked on new jobs linked to childcare and information and communication technology (ICT).

The needs of one parent families are very carefully planned for; this includes fathers, mothers and carers. However, the centre is still working hard to engage more lone parents and fathers as a whole. As a result, the number attending is rising, but leaders know that there are still more lone parents in the reach who may benefit from the work of the centre, especially the sensitive and supportive help for very young parents. Fathers are beginning to take part in drop in sessions, but the centre has identified that they would also like more whole-family activities, possibly occasionally at the weekends. Leaders are keen to get more fathers involved and have started work on this, but there is more to do.

The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users	1
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

As one parent explained, 'The manager has really worked hard to get our views. There has been a massive improvement in the last two years. At first there were just two sessions available and now there are loads.' Another noted, 'My other child did not have this facility and it was hard to settle her at school. Now, the child who goes to the centre is less clingy, is more confident and sociable.' These positive comments demonstrate the good leadership of the centre and the impact of its work in meeting users' needs so well.

Equality of access and promotion of diversity are central to the ethos of the centre and, as such, are consequently making a significant contribution to community cohesion. The centre works hard to make sure that all parents and carers are well informed by translating booklets, posters and general information into a range of community languages. In addition, they are proactive in working to involve hard to reach groups. Notable success shows in the much increased involvement of families for whom English is an additional language and for those with special educational needs and/or disabilities. Following a review of support for fathers, this has been a focus and is still developing. Notable successes include supporting lone fathers to get back to work. The 'Golden Threads for Narrowing the Gap' is contributing well to the way that leaders measure and assesses the impact of its work.

Determined leadership and management, at all levels, put the needs of users at the centre of all development plans. The centre is financially secure. Target setting is good and often very tightly focused on national health and educational outcomes. However, data about healthy outcomes and targets are only just beginning to be available from the Primary Care Trust to ensure that the Joint Advisory Board has the most up-to-date and helpful information upon which to plan and evaluate some elements of its work. Leaders are keen to make the most of new information as it becomes increasingly available.

Centre leaders work very closely with the advisory board, parents and carers and the health service overall, so that partnerships are very effective. Together, they are reflective. Leaders work very closely with the local authority to provide the services that are expected. They have a good understanding of the issues faced by the centre and monitor the quality and impact of the services offered. The effective work of the local authority data team contributes much to the centre's good self-evaluation. This database is constantly under review and the team are equally keen to strengthen the quality of data about health targets and outcomes.

The centre has effective procedures for safeguarding children and for ensuring the security of the premises. All staff are well trained in child protection arrangements and the vetting of staff and volunteers is thorough. There are clear and well used systems for sharing important information with the relevant agencies in order to keep children from harm. Early intervention is aided by the home visits and the sharing of key information to protect vulnerable individuals. Risk assessment

procedures are very thorough. Case study information shows that staff work effectively to ensure that they do all they can to promote emotional health and well-being, as well as dealing with domestic violence in a supportive, sympathetic and integrated way.

The centre provides outstanding value for money because it uses its available resources extremely well and seeks users' views exceptionally well. Very impressive assessment of needs leads to adapting the support quickly and very effectively. Provision of services is going from strength to strength and activities are exceptionally well supported and often over subscribed. Links and relationships between statutory, voluntary and independent providers are exceptionally well established and have a very positive impact on the good outcomes for children, parents and carers. Leaders support and encourage the wider community to engage with services well, this is not yet outstanding as they are still working to engage more fathers and lone parents.

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	1
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	1
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

Not applicable

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Summary for centre users

We inspected The Avenue Children's Centre on 14 and 15 July 2011. We judged the centre as good. We know that almost all of you agree that the setting is, in your words, 'fantastic'. All of the staff and leaders work very well together and they listen carefully to what you want and then quickly respond by altering the services to meet your needs. These are significant factors in why the centre is successful and gives outstanding value for money. The partnerships with others are outstanding.

Your contributions to the inspection were greatly appreciated and we would like to thank those of you who took the time to meet with us and share your thoughts about the centre. In a recent questionnaire, 96% of you agreed that the centre is very successfully providing the support that you need and this was confirmed in discussions during the inspection. Notably, you spoke about having good childcare, interesting activities to do with your children and endless help with child development or home difficulties. You agree that the centre is helping you to have time for yourselves and feel happier about parenthood. Additionally, you are helped sensitively to improve your parenting skills as well as your children's learning and development. Some of you greatly value these facilities because they are helping you to return to work or overcome complex personal difficulties. Staff work very hard to assess your individual needs. If they are unable to help you themselves they put you in touch with other agencies or organisations.

Your children do well here, making good progress in their learning and development. Like many of you, they grow in confidence and skills. You greatly benefit from the many services which the centre provides, including sessions run by health visitors and midwives. There is a good focus on being healthy and safe. Nonetheless, leaders correctly continue to be focused on improving the health outcomes as more data become available from the Primary Care Trust (PCT). This means that the Joint Advisory Board will be able to evaluate more precisely how well the centre is doing by comparing its work very carefully with national data. You enjoy all of the activities, noting 'Rhythm and Rhyme', 'Chitter Chatter' and 'Messy Play' in particular.

The centre helps many of you with your English speaking skills. Staff really help you to learn how to play with your children and engage in purposeful discussions with them, as you are very keen to develop your children's communication skills to very best effect. To make this outstanding, this feature of the centre's work is an area for further development.

You commented that the work of the centre reduces loneliness and depression and helps you to make new friends and have fun. The centre provides good opportunities

for you to further your own education, gain additional qualifications and celebrate different cultural traditions. It was fantastic to see you all contributing so much to the very successful 'Round the World' celebration. The centre is inclusive and you agree. Even so, the manager and all others are working hard to make sure that any lone parents are as fully involved as possible. You can also help with this, by spreading the word about how welcoming the centre is for all. Fathers are beginning to be more involved as well, but there is still more to do on this.

Everyone is very excited about moving into the new accommodation, which will mean that even more activities will be available on site and this will help to make learning and development outstanding in the future.

Thank you again for taking the time to speak with us during our visit. We much appreciated your willingness to talk with us about some of your personal experiences. Best wishes to you and your families.

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