

Inspection report for Lavender Children's Centre

Local authority	Merton
Inspection number	367830
Inspection dates	9 August and 1–2 September 2011
Reporting inspector	Wendy Ratcliff HMI

Centre governance	Local authority
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Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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Linked school if applicable	Not applicable
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Lavender Nursery

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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 an early years inspector. The inspectors held meetings with the centre managers, members of the advisory board, staff, local authority representatives and partner agencies, including representatives from the health service. They had informal discussions with parents, carers and children and visited activities at the centre and at the Steers Mead Children's Centre.

They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation, including key policies, the centre's self-evaluation documents, its operational plan, action plan, evaluations and data about people who use the centre.

The inspection took place across three dates. It started on 9 August 2011, but was postponed due to unforeseen circumstances in the local area.

Information about the centre

Lavender Children's Centre is a phase one centre that was designated in 2005 and is run directly by the local authority. It provides all elements of the core offer, which includes integrated childcare, health services, family support and outreach. It has links to Jobcentre Plus.

The centre is described as a two site 'locality model' as it works with the neighbouring Steers Mead Children's Centre, a phase two centre that was designated in February 2008. Since 2010 the two centres have been jointly managed and share governance and staffing structure. Both sites are situated within the Lavender Fields ward of Merton and are known as the Lavender Locality Children's Centre. The local authority reviewed and amended the centre's reach area in 2009 and, as a result, the two centres now serve areas which are in the top 30% most disadvantaged in the country. This report focuses on the Lavender Children's Centre. The advisory board includes representatives from a number of community partners and users.

There are 1,198 children aged under five years living in the centre's catchment area. The social, economic and ethnic background of users in the reach is diverse. Around 15% of children aged under five years are living in households dependent on workless benefits. The area data show that around 60% of families are from a range of different minority ethnic groups, with the largest groups from the Tamil and Polish speaking communities. Data show that children in Reception classes living in the reach who do not have English as their first language is 42%, but increases to 64% when measuring the number of children attending schools in the catchment. On entry to school children's range of skills and knowledge are below those expected for their age, with communication, language and literacy being the weakest area.

The centre provides childcare for children under eight years and is registered on the Early Years Register and both parts of the Childcare Register. The centre provides a 90 place nursery for children from three months to five years, which is open from 8.00am to 6.00pm each weekday, for 49 weeks of the year. The pre-school opened in September 2011 in order to increase the number of available spaces in the borough for two-year-olds. The pre-school operates from 9.15am to 12.15pm each weekday during term time.

The children's centre is open on weekdays from 9.00am to 5.00pm for 49 weeks of the year. The centre closes for one week in the summer, one week at Christmas and for five training days through the year. The centre is open on some evenings for parentcraft classes run by health partners. Activities for fathers operate on some evenings and Saturdays from the Steers Mead site.

Merton's Pre-School Learning Alliance and the Lavender midwifery team from St George's Hospital are located within the London Road centre.

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

Overall effectiveness of Lavender Children's centre is good. Some aspects are

outstanding. This is because those in charge have an accurate understanding of the centre's strengths, areas for improvement and have high aspirations to improve services further. Staff work extremely well as a team and fully subscribe to the centre's vision, 'together we can make a difference'. The centre works exceptionally well with key partners to deliver good-quality cohesive services, which are leading to a positive impact on outcomes for users. As a result, the centre has a good capacity to improve further.

The centre knows the local community exceptionally well because it analyses available data to identify different groups and target services. Staff and partners are highly effective in sensitively assessing the needs of children and families following the Merton Wellbeing Model. The numbers of 'requests for service' and the use of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) are increasing as more users are accessing services. For example, the number of children accessing two-year-old funding has doubled in the last year. The centre demonstrates outstanding value for money. Staffing and resources across the Lavender locality are used extremely well to ensure services are not duplicated and available space at each venue is maximised effectively.

Staff have analysed the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile scores for the schools in their reach and the centre's 'Every Child a Talker' (ECAT) data in order to plan and implement a 'school readiness' programme. Early indications and evaluations suggest that this programme has had a positive impact on children's personal, social and emotional skills. The centre is working closely with the schools in order to measure the effectiveness of the programme for the 75 children who took part this summer as they enter nursery. Staff have completed a detailed evaluation and recognise the need to extend and start the programme earlier in order to reach more of the vulnerable two-years-olds they have identified as living in the more deprived areas of the reach. The programme is planned to help narrow the attainment gap for these children compared with the majority of children nationally and provide a smooth transition into school. Children are making good progress in their communication and language skills because of the implementation of ECAT project and early intervention programmes such as 'Chitter Chatter'.

Safeguarding practices and procedures are robust, highly effective and fully understood by staff. The centre sees safeguarding at the heart of its work. Staff build trusting relationships with families so they feel able to engage with other professionals to access specialist help through the Supporting Families Team when they are experiencing difficulties in their lives. Users experience outstanding care, guidance and support from the staff at the centre. Families in times of crisis feel confident to approach the centre for support and trust adults to help them. One parent reported, 'I would not have coped without the support of the children's centre.'

The centre serves a diverse community and provides a welcoming and inclusive environment for all users. There is a range of information translated into languages such as Polish and Tamil. Families say how they and their children are learning about

different cultures as these are celebrated through planned activities during sessions, such as 'World Food Day'. Users say staff help them develop confidence so they feel able to talk to others about the festivals they celebrate, promoting community cohesion.

Healthy lifestyles are actively promoted and users are responding well to the various health services offered across the two centres. Parents show that they are developing a good understanding of how to keep themselves and their families healthy as they attend sessions such as 'Fun Food Factory', providing opportunities for families to make and try healthy meals. 'Jumping Beans' and 'Family Fun' sessions held during the summer, promoting fun outdoor activities, were popular with families.

Families are improving their awareness of keeping their children safe in the home through events such as Safety Week, which includes visits from the fire brigade to promote the use of smoke alarms. 'Deborah the Zebra' is helping children to develop an understanding of road safety in a fun way. New data are due to come through to the centre from health partners. The centre is planning to use this new data to identify the areas where it needs to focus the services and so heighten families' awareness of how to sustain healthy lifestyles and promote safety outcomes further.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Embed and extend the 'school readiness' programme to target more of the vulnerable two-year-olds in order to improve their outcomes and narrow the gap in their attainment with that of the majority of children nationally as they start school.
- Analyse the newly available data from health partners in order to identify and target services to ensure that outcomes are promoted further.

How good are outcomes for users?

2

Outcomes for the children and families who use the centre are good. Parents and carers are responding well to universal health services that are held across the locality, such as antenatal appointments, health clinic and parentcraft classes. Breastfeeding data are not yet available at a local level. However, health visitors report that take up rates are good initially but fall by six to eight weeks. The centre follows the UNICEF Baby Friendly Initiative, with designated breastfeeding areas available and mothers value the support they receive from health professionals. Parents gain a greater understanding of appropriate foods for their babies as they attend weaning classes run by the health service. The emotional well-being of users is supported through sessions such as baby massage. These sessions help parents and carers to bond with their babies.

Healthy eating is promoted during activity sessions where staff encourage parents and children to sit together to enjoy a healthy snack. One parent reports that, as a result, her child now sits at the table at home to eat a meal. The centre has begun to target specific families for healthy eating sessions as part of the school readiness programme in order to help parents increase their understanding of a healthy diet.

The CAF process and opportunities offered by the 'Junior Opportunities Group' (JOG) support children identified with additional needs. The weekly drop in provides a range of activities for children whilst their parents receive support and advice relating to their child's specific needs. Data show that the centre is reaching all the children identified with special educational needs and/or disabilities in their area and interventions are having a positive impact on their development. Children successfully move from being on 'early years action plus' to 'early years action' as they start school.

Users feel the centre is a safe place. Families in times of crisis feel confident to share their concerns with staff, such as instances of domestic violence, immigration concerns or housing problems. Parents and carers report how the centre has helped them at such times and case studies show how specific support provided through 'requests for service' have had a positive impact on families' emotional well-being. One parent reports, 'I owe the centre so much.'

Parents and carers grow in confidence as a result of attending centre activities and courses. The 'Incredible Years' parenting programme is helping to develop parenting skills and strategies for understanding and managing children's behaviour in a fun and supportive way. Parents report, 'It has given us tools to become better parents,' and, 'I have learnt to play with the children and be a happy parent.' There is a good increase in the number of families being referred for and attending employability workshops. The centre has increased the number of families it reaches who are dependent on workless benefits. 'Requests for service' have increased by approximately 62%, with a significant increase of requests being allocated to an employability worker. As a result, users are accessing a range of services that are having a positive impact on their economic stability and, for some, resulting in a return to employment. There are several case studies of users accessing training, such as childcare courses, which has led to further training, opportunities to volunteer or employment. For example, users from the Tamil community are supported to attend English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) courses and childcare courses.

Parents and carers feel centre staff help them to recognise the importance of supporting their children to take safe risks in their play during sessions such as 'Little Explorers'. As a result, children are developing a good understanding of how to keep themselves safe. A greater number of children are being kept safer in their homes due to individual work with families to promote home safety. Centre staff who visit families in their own home refer users to 'Safe Homes' in order to access safety equipment such as stair gates.

Children and parents join together to enjoy playing during 'Stay and Play' sessions. Parents and carers are supported to observe their children at play and engage in their learning. Parents say their children are gaining independence and learning to take turns, which helps them to be ready for pre-school. A focus on language and communication has seen extremely positive benefits in improving children's speech, by increasing parents' understanding of how the parents can encourage children's language development. Centre staff use 'Sign a long' during 'Play and Stay' sessions. Parents report that their children are now using signs at home and to communicate with peers who speak different languages.

The impact of the recently introduced 'school readiness' programme is not yet fully demonstrated. However, the programme has already seen some success as parents and carers report they read to their children more often, encourage independence and use the services of the children's centre and library. The workshops have provided parents with a greater understanding of preparing their children for school. In 2011 around 61% of children living in the reach area achieved a total of at least 78 points across the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile, which is below the local authority average. Outcomes for those children who attend the nursery provision are outstanding.

The centre is an integral part of the community and all users treat each other with respect. Childminders are supported in developing their practice as they are provided with opportunities for 'taster' sessions, such as promoting healthy eating. Parents and carers value the opportunities to find out about each others' cultures and as a result, feel part of the wider community. Users are asked to express their views in a variety of ways including customer satisfaction surveys and questionnaires. Staff take account of children's views when they evaluate the effectiveness of sessions. Parent representatives who sit on the advisory board are actively involved in centre activities, enthusiastically promote the activities at the centre and seek users' 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, 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

Families highly value the outstanding care, guidance and support given to them. Many users told inspectors how centre staff are approachable, friendly and help them when they are experiencing a change in their circumstance that may have an adverse impact on their lives. This is because centre staff are highly skilled at supporting users and regularly 'go the extra mile' to ensure users are able to make positive changes in their lives.

The centre is highly effective at sensitively assessing the individual needs of children and families and skilfully identifies those who are more vulnerable and require targeted services. Available data are analysed well in order to target specific groups.

All staff and partners are clear on the referral process, which includes 'requests for service' and the Common Assessment Framework. Referrals are passed to the 0-12 Supporting Families Team for assessment and allocation at a weekly panel, which includes a range of key professionals and partners. The process is working exceptionally well and data show an increase of around 67% in services being allocated. Services include referrals to parenting programmes and services relating to economic stability and employment. Individual case studies evidence how services are having a positive impact on outcomes, for example, by helping parents to access childcare from the Childcare Support Fund and support with curriculum vitae writing, which result in parents returning to work.

The centre is now reaching a good proportion of its target groups, such as lone parents, fathers, families from a range of minority ethnic groups and families dependent on workless benefits. This is because those in charge have analysed available data, worked in partnership with key agencies and used their local knowledge to target services. For example, more fathers are attending 'Play and Stay' sessions and have benefited from an 'Incredible Years' parenting course for fathers. Further services are included in the centre's activity programme this term, such as 'Men Behaving Dadly' (an early evening football session) in order to reach and engage more fathers from the reach area. The centre recognises that the most vulnerable families are those least likely to be accessing services, such as those families with two-year-olds identified in the more deprived areas of the reach. It already has a good success rate in engaging with families whose circumstances have made them hard to reach, but has plans to continue to strengthen its outreach programme in order to reach and engage with more of these families.

Centre staff, parent representatives and partners are skilful in directing parents and carers to access different services. For example, the new parents who attend the health clinic are introduced to the 'Little Explorers' group as this is planned on the same day. Provision to help children learn and develop is good. Staff plan activity sessions well to promote independent exploration and purposeful learning. Sessions focus on identified areas of the Early Years Foundation Stage and the ECAT project has been fully embedded across centre activities. School readiness is a clear focus for

the centre. The programme includes nursery home visits, 'New to Nursery' workshops and 'handy tip' sheets for improving the home learning environment. This work is being very successful with those families already in contact with the centre and staff are now planning to extend this programme by offering more sessions at participating schools.

The centre encourages parents to attend a range of parenting courses and access training courses, such as English for speakers of other languages. Users have easy access to a very good range of information, guidance and advice regarding topics which are relevant to them. This includes information provided by Jobcentre Plus on current vacancies in the area. More sensitive information, for example on domestic violence, is displayed in toilet cubicles so users can access it without being observed by others. Much information is also available in different languages, such as Tamil, Polish and Urdu.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

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	1

How effective are the leadership and management?

2

Governance and accountability are clear. The local advisory board is effectively establishing its role of challenging and supporting the children's centre. Enthusiastic parent representatives represent the views of users and are being supported well in their developing role on the advisory board. They are considering ways to engage more users in shaping services and contributing to the governance of the centre. The two centre leaders are highly committed and are very much at the heart of the centre's success. They galvanise the enthusiasm of staff and channel their efforts to good effect. Line management arrangements are clear and understood and staff value the regular supervision and professional development they receive.

The centre is provided with good levels of support from the local authority. It works together with partners and the advisory board to monitor and measure the effectiveness of services and to develop challenging targets for the future. Together with the support of the local authority, the centre is establishing smarter ways to use available data to demonstrate the longer term impact services are having on the outcomes for users. For example, the staff are currently mapping the ECAT assessment scores, baseline assessment and Early Years Foundation Stage Profile

scores in order to identify whether programmes, such as 'school readiness', are narrowing the achievement gap as children start school. The local authority has recently received a range of useful data from health partners and is incorporating this information into the reports it provides to each centre. The data were available to the centre for the first time during the inspection and leaders are enthusiastic to receive the full report in order to plan and target services to improve health and safe outcomes further. The evaluation and analysis of the effectiveness of services lead to the identification of priorities for improvement. Those in charge have an accurate understanding of the centre's strengths and where they need to improve further.

The centre is managed in a way which ensures the best use of resources. Services provided by the centre, such as 'Stay and Play', are very well used and are now reaching many targeted groups in the community. Staff deployment is highly effective in working with those considered more vulnerable and the centre is establishing the volunteer programme in order to ensure universal services are sustained. For example, 'Cheeky Tots' is a drop-in session for local childminders, run by a childminder. The centre space is hired to community users outside of centre opening hours to providing an additional income. Those in charge are skilful in how they manage resources to maximise their support for their vulnerable groups. The organisation who provides the baby massage courses, for example, are not charged to use a room at the Steers Mead centre because staff have negotiated a number of spaces on the course for targeted families.

The centre has a strong commitment to providing an inclusive environment and removing barriers to services. A crèche is provided so parents can access courses. The centre is accessible to all users. The Tamil support worker attends health appointments with families, removing barriers for the Tamil community to access midwifery services, which is having a positive impact on health outcomes. The excellent partnership working with key partners, such as health professionals, the 0-12 Supporting Families Team, Tamil Welfare Group, the early support team and portage ensures services are integrated and accessible to the wider community.

Safeguarding is a particular strength as practices are rigorous and robust, including safe recruitment and quality assurance systems carried out by the local authority. Comprehensive risk assessments are systematically carried out to ensure the safety of all users, including looked after children who access the centre for supervised contact. All staff show a secure understanding and high commitment to ensuring the well-being of children and their families. They are clear on the procedure to follow if they have a concern about a child, including the duty manager system managed by the 0-12 Supporting Families Team. Practice for making referrals is clearly understood by all partners.

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
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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	1
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

The inspection judgements from the early years inspection carried out in December 2010 were used to inform judgements. The overall outcome for the inspection at the Lavender Nursery was judged as outstanding.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Lavender Children's Centre on 9 August and 1 and 2 September 2011. We judged the centre as good overall, with some outstanding features.

Your children's centre provides you with an attractive, safe and inclusive environment where you and your children feel safe, valued and respected. Those of you that we spoke to told us that you really enjoy the range of activities on offer, for example drop-in groups such as 'Stay and Play', 'Little Explorers' and 'Cheeky Tots'. From our observations, discussions and case studies, we were able to see that the centre is having a positive impact on your lives. The centre has embedded the 'Every Child a Talker' project into activity sessions and, as a result, children are making

good progress in their communication and language skills. The 'school readiness' programme has been successful in helping parents and carers prepare children for school. The centre is planning to extend this programme in order to offer more sessions in the local schools.

We found the care, guidance and support that staff offer you are outstanding. You told us that you highly appreciate the support you receive from staff and how they take time to listen, particularly when you may be experiencing challenging circumstances in your lives. One parent told us, 'I would not have coped without the support of the children's centre.'

Staff are enthusiastic and work well as a team. They are committed to the centre's vision, 'Together we can make a difference', so they can help you make positive changes in your lives. Outcomes for users are good and improving. We enjoyed hearing about events such as World Food Day and how you had the opportunity to taste foods from different cultures. The centre serves a diverse community and you told us how you and your children are learning about and celebrating different cultures. As a result, you feel part of the wider community. It was good to hear how those of you who do not speak English are helped by staff or other parents to access services and information is provided in other languages such as Tamil and Polish.

The centre works exceptionally well with health partners in supporting you and your families to improve your health. Sessions such as 'Jumping Beans', 'Family Fun and Games' and 'Fun Food Factory' are helping you to develop a good understanding of how to keep yourselves and your families healthy. You told us how children enjoy healthy snacks during activity sessions and how this is encouraging children to sit at a table to eat a meal. An event such as Safety Week is helping you to improve your awareness of safety in the home and 'Deborah the Zebra' is helping your children to develop an understanding of road safety in a fun way.

Partnerships with key agencies are particularly strong so they can offer the correct support and guidance. Staff and partners are highly effective in assessing the individual needs of children and families in order to ensure you receive the correct support. More families are benefiting from attending employability workshops and are accessing information to help improve their economic stability. There has been an increase in the number of children accessing two-year-old funding, which has doubled in the last year. We found out how some courses, such as 'Incredible Years', are helping you to develop parent skills and strategies for understanding and managing children's behaviour. One parent reports, 'It has given us the tools to become better parents.' We found that the centre carefully plans the use of available space and resources, providing excellent value for money. For example, the parenting courses are held at Steers Mead so there is space and staff to provide crèche facilities.

Safeguarding procedures are outstanding and staff demonstrate a high awareness of what to do to ensure you and your children are safe. For example, leaders follow robust practices to ensure that all those working in the centre are suitable to do so and staff are trained in how to safeguard children.

We know that the centre provides you with a range of opportunities to evaluate the activity sessions and courses you attend. The parent representatives are keen to involve more of you in shaping future activities and developing ways to use your ideas. Staff take account of children's views as they observe children during their play. They use this information to make activities even more inviting.

Those in charge have set clear targets in order to continue to improve the range of services they provide so they can reach even more families in the community. They have used available data skilfully to identify more two-year-olds who would benefit from accessing services. Staff have plans to extend the 'school readiness' programme in order reach these families and help children to develop skills so they experience a smooth transition to school.

The centre receives helpful information from the local authority and partners about the area. New data have recently become available that show higher than average levels of children in Reception classes are obese and there are high instances of children aged under five attending accident and emergency departments. We have asked the centre to look carefully at this data in order to target services that will help to reduce these numbers.

We would like to thank the centre users for speaking with us and contributing to the inspection at Lavender Children's Centre.

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