

Inspection report for Bedford Central Children's Centre (Bedford Borough)

Local authority	Bedford Borough
Inspection number	366417
Inspection dates	17–18 February 2011
Reporting inspector	Lois Furness

Centre governance	Spurgeons commissioned by the Local Authority
Centre leader	Caroline Woolston
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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Linked school if applicable	Priory Lower School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Jumping Jacks EY301221

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, prospective parents and young children
- maximising the benefit of those services to parents, prospective parents and young children
- improving the well-being of young children.

The report is made to the local authority and a copy is sent to the children's centre. The local authority may send the report to such persons it considers appropriate and must arrange for an action plan to be produced in relation to the findings in this report.

An inspection of the maintained nursery was carried out at the same time as the inspection of the centre under Section 5 of the Education Act 2005. The report of this inspection is available on our website www.ofsted.gov.uk.

This inspection was carried out by an additional inspector and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with centre leaders and managers, local authority representatives, staff, parents and carers, partnership representatives, user groups and members of the advisory board.

They observed the centre's work and looked at a range of documentation, including the centre's operational plans, its' evaluations and safeguarding procedures.

Information about the centre

Bedford Central is a purpose built children's centre situated in the grounds of Priory Lower School, serving the wards of Castle and Newnham, which are separated by the town centre. The locality has features of significant deprivation, with one of its 'Super Output' areas being ranked in the 10% most deprived areas in the country and another in the highest 20%. Within the reach of 1109 children, the majority of families are White British, with an increasing number of families from Pakistan and Eastern Europe settling in the area. There is high unemployment but the centre is unable to supply information regarding the number of families accessing benefits. On entry to the Early Years Foundation Stage children are below the level expected of them is.

The centre opened in 2008, and is a Phase 2 centre operating under the support of Spurgeons, a charity which has been commissioned by the local authority to provide governance and support to some of the children's centres in this district. There is also a local advisory board, made up of the professionals who provide services to the

centre. The full core offer of integrated childcare and early learning, health, family support and outreach, links to Jobcentre Plus and childminding services are available, but because of limited accommodation many of these services are provided at other children's centres or other locations. Childcare is provided at 'Jumping Jacks' which was last inspected in July 2007. The inspection report can be found on the Ofsted website www.ofsted.gov.uk.

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

3

Capacity for sustained improvement

The centre's capacity for sustained improvement, including the quality of its leadership and management

3

Main findings

This centre offers sound support for children and their families, and outcomes are satisfactory. Procedures and practices to safeguard users are satisfactory. Users say they feel safe at the centre and their children are cared for well. A range of information and different activities help parents and carers to develop a secure understanding of how to keep themselves and their children free from harm. Satisfactory links with social services and health professionals support children and families in need and those who might be at risk. Parents and carers report they are treated with the 'utmost respect' and are adamant that the centre makes a positive difference to their lives. 'I really look forward to coming here,' and 'I do not know what I would do without it,' are typical comments made by users. Inspectors observed parents, carers and children socialising well with each other, as a warm and welcoming atmosphere enabled them to relax and feel 'at home'. Consequently, the behaviour of children is good. Users enjoy their time at the centre with one child placing a sad face in the suggestion box as he was sad when he had to leave to go home. Although the achievement of children is good, opportunities for adults to develop their skills of literacy and numeracy, thereby increasing their chances of employment, are limited.

The needs of individual families and children who are accessing services are satisfactorily understood by staff. Appropriate steps are taken to work with partners and other agencies in meeting their needs. There has been success in engaging groups of minority ethnic parents, for example by providing bilingual support for Asian families. However, the centre is not fully effective in encouraging all families to make use of its services, especially those who are made vulnerable by their

circumstances such as teenage mothers, lone parents and children and their families with special educational needs and/or disabilities. Therefore the promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory.

Leadership and management of the centre are satisfactory and the centre runs smoothly. Staffing shortages have placed a burden on the leadership, and time has been spent covering for absent staff which has slowed down the pace of development. Whilst there is some collation and use of centre-specific data, evaluations of activities and other local information is not systematic or rigorous enough. For example, there is limited monitoring of which users are accessing different services. A system has been introduced to capture this information, but this is not yet used effectively enough to understand how successfully the centre meets families' needs. The result of this, is that self-evaluation is too generous. The advisory board monitors the work of the centre satisfactorily. However, there are no parent and carers on the advisory board, which limits opportunities for them to influence the way the centre develops. The centre's appropriate action plan does not set sharp targets that can be used to measure success. The absence of targets makes it difficult for the advisory board, which includes a representative from Spurgeons, to challenge the leadership and hold it to account for the centre's success. Although there are signs of good improvements for example, in end of Early Years Foundation Stage outcomes, it is too early for the centre to be able to demonstrate that its actions are having sustained positive outcomes for children and families in the community. The capacity for further improvement is therefore satisfactory.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Strengthen leadership and management by:
 - improving the way in which the advisory board challenges the centre and holds it to account for its work
 - ensuring the action plan contains sharp measurable success targets to enable leaders to evaluate the success of their work
 - making self-evaluation more rigorous by conducting a thorough analysis of available data to inform impact and outcomes
 - ensuring the views of parents consistently contribute to the governance of the centre and in determining and shaping services.

- Increase the numbers of families that use the centre, particularly those belonging to groups that are not currently well represented, especially teenage mothers, lone parents and children and their families with special educational needs and/or disabilities.

- Increase opportunities for adult learning with regard to the promotion of literacy and numeracy skills.

How good are outcomes for users?

3

The centre provides a broad range of activities across all of the five outcomes which are developed in partnership with other agencies. However, there is insufficient evidence of how these are making a difference to families and to improving outcomes. Parents and carers have a satisfactory understanding of the importance of leading a healthy lifestyle and take advantage of the services on offer. These include group sessions such as 'On the Go', 'Rhythm Kids' and 'Trekking Tots'. Anecdotal evidence indicates that the emotional well-being of mothers and babies is improved by learning baby massage techniques. Parents and carers comment that they are more confident and aware of how to keep themselves and their children healthy through attending the centre. They say they find the world recipe cards useful, and visits from the oral health team provide them with helpful information about oral hygiene. The 'Baby Brasserie' is providing good support for breastfeeding mothers, although currently there are no midwives attached to this centre. The Healthy under 5's Award shows the commitment to improving health outcomes, and most sessions offer healthy snacks including seasonal fruit. Leaders have identified smoking cessation, reducing obesity and promoting and sustaining breastfeeding as priorities, but as yet documentation does not outline clearly enough details of the actions to be taken, how outcomes will be measured and how the information will be used to improve services.

The centre is a safe environment and there is good attention to keeping users safe through regular advice and signposting to other agencies. Users say they feel safe at the centre and risk assessments are carried out conscientiously at the start of each group session. Children behave safely, and parents and carers are made aware of safety in the home through systems, such as home checks by health visitors, and the availability of safety packs. Courses and support have been provided on safe sex, managing domestic violence and first aid, for example. Children who are vulnerable by their circumstances are identified satisfactorily and support programmes are put in place for the whole family. However, protocols and practices for making referrals and the sharing of information between agencies, although satisfactory, lack rigour. The centre has only recently trained staff in the use of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF).

The inspection of the Early Years Foundation Stage in Priory Lower School evaluates children as making good progress in their learning and development. Data show that this is making a positive contribution to narrowing the achievement gap in the area. Children learn to share and play together well and clearly enjoy their learning. During the 'On the Go' session observed, many children left their parents and carers, confident to play with the musical instruments available. Some parents benefit from courses such as 'Parenting Puzzle', which help parents understand their children's behavioural patterns. One mother said, 'This course is great and has helped me manage my child's behaviour at home.' Although children's skills are improving, there are too few opportunities for adults to improve their academic skills and employment opportunities. There are individual success stories, but, there are few links to courses that result in accredited qualifications.

Children and their families using the centre treat each other with respect and, as a result, community cohesion is developing well. The 'Life in the Centre' project has been effective in informing users of the different nationalities that attend sessions. There are regular opportunities for children and parents and carers to express their views about these sessions. However, the centre manager knows the role of parents and carers in decision-making and their involvement in governance is not sufficiently developed. Volunteering opportunities, although satisfactory, are not always maximised. For example, two mothers stated that they would welcome opportunities to speak to others about how they have successfully managed to sustain breastfeeding.

Support provided by the centre helps to promote economic stability, for example, through interviews with Jobcentre Plus. Children's learning journeys, as evidenced in the 'Family Books', demonstrate that children are making good progress in developing skills for the future from their starting points.

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	3
The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	3
The extent to which all users enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	3
The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships and users contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	3
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents are developing economic stability and independence including access to training	3

How good is the provision?

3

The enjoyment and appreciation of those who use the centre regularly is irrefutable. All parents and carers who spoke to inspectors were positive about the staff and how they had supported them and their families. Relationships are good and one parent said: 'The staff are really friendly here, and make you feel very welcome. This has helped me and my child to grow in confidence.' Personal development is improving, as children learn to share and take turns during activities. Parents and carers enjoy the group sessions, which supports them in developing their parenting skills. They appreciate courses such as first aid. They say that 'messy play' sessions have helped them to play with their children at home. The 'Bookstart' project has successfully encouraged parents and carers to use the library and read stories with their children. Good records are kept of children's learning and the 'Family books' provide very useful and comprehensive information about children's development. However, the achievements of adults are less well recorded, and information about how to

progress further is not a strong feature of provision.

The families who use the centre are known well to staff. There is close attention to child protection and all staff are starting to use the CAF to streamline documentation between different services. Satisfactory guidance is given to users about smoking cessation, alcohol and drug misuse and sexual health. However, the extent to which the range of outreach services, activities and opportunities meets the needs of all families is not rigorously evaluated. Available data is not analysed sufficiently well to support staff in measuring the impact of actions on outcomes for all users. Targeting support and guidance is based on local knowledge rather than on an accurate analysis of families' needs. Nevertheless, there are early signs that there is an improving picture as more information is becoming available. The newly-introduced way of registering birth details is ensuring that all new families are receiving information about the centre and its services. The centre manger recognises that some groups are not attending and has implemented actions to try to overcome this. For example, the Saturday 'Dad's group' was not well attended and so links have been made with the YMCA to try to engage more fathers in the centre's work. In addition, some group sessions are now delivered at a local church, in order to encourage the involvement of families who live a distance away from the centre. Despite this, the support given to all families, especially teenage mothers, lone parents and children and their families with special educational needs and/or disabilities is limited.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users	3
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all users	3
The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of users and the wider community	3
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to users within the centre and the wider community	3

How effective are the leadership and management?

3

The leadership and management of the children's centre are developing satisfactorily and there is a clear focus on improvement held by managers, the local authority and the advisory board. However, aspects of the self-evaluation are at times over generous, and centre staff are aware that they are at the 'start of a journey' of improvement. The centre's action plan, although identifying the right priorities, lacks detail especially in terms of how success will be measured. It does not say how evaluation will focus on the impact of the centre's actions on users' outcomes. These are the reasons why the centre's capacity to improve is evaluated as satisfactory.

The centre runs smoothly on a day-to-day basis and the well-being of all users is a

key priority. Staff have undertaken relevant training and have suitable qualifications to support families and keep them safe. Appropriate recruitment and vetting checks are made on staff and safeguarding procedures and policies are satisfactory. However, policies are not always personalised to the needs of this centre. First aid and parenting courses are popular and viewed as helping parents and carers to keep safe. There is effective multi-agency cooperation to safeguard children in need, and issues are followed up appropriately. Record keeping is satisfactory, and the newly-introduced CAF is helping to ensure paperwork between different agencies is more coherent.

The local authority provides satisfactory support in term of accountability and decision-making, although its annual performance review does not set clear targets for the centre to achieve. The role of the advisory board is still developing and, until very recently, the centre manager was also the chair of the board, making challenge and accountability difficult to manage. Parents and carers do not make contributions to the advisory board's deliberations nor is there an established parents' and carers' forum.

All staff provide a warm welcome to users, and diversity is celebrated appropriately through displays, resources and celebrating different religious festivals and events. Good steps are taken to ensure equality of opportunity for some groups of users, for example, black minority ethnic groups but are less effective with others such as children and their families with special educational needs and/or disabilities. Strengths and weaknesses in provision are known and leaders recognise that there is a lack of detailed information about families within the reach area to enable them to target resources more efficiently. Even so, value for money is satisfactory.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day to day management arrangements are clear and understood	3
The extent to which ambitious targets drive improvement, provision is integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community	3
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of users and the wider community	3
The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties	3
The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults	3
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	3

commissioned to provide	
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

Any other information used to inform the judgements made during this inspection

Priory Lower School was inspected at the same time as this inspection. The lead inspectors of both inspections met to share information. The report of Priory Lower School is available on the Ofsted website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Bedford Central CC (Bedford Borough) on 17–18 February 2011. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

Thank you for making us feel welcome and for contributing to the inspection by sharing your experiences of your children's centre.

Many of you told us that the staff are friendly and that you are made to feel very welcome when you visit the centre. We could see that children, parents and carers enjoy many of the activities on offer. For example, during the music session during 'On the Go' you were all enjoying playing different instruments and dancing alongside your children. Some of you explained how the centre is helping you to gain more confidence; for example, in communicating with your children and helping you to understand how they learn and develop. You told us that the 'Family Books' are a wonderful record of your child's development. Your children are making good progress in their learning, including their personal development, and this is shown by their improving outcomes by the time they enter Year 1 in Priory Lower School. We have asked the centre to help some of you improve your literacy and numeracy skills and give some of you the chance to gain qualifications to help you find employment.

It is good to know that you feel safe and we think the centre's safeguarding procedures are satisfactory. Many of you told us how the staff have helped you to manage your children's behaviour and how helpful are the 'Parenting Puzzle' courses. You told us that the first aid courses have been useful in helping you to keep your child safe. We are pleased that staff are good at showing you respect and helping

you to lead healthy lifestyles. Some of you told us that the world recipe cards have been particularly useful in helping you to prepare healthy meals at home.

However, although we are glad that those of you who attend the centre regularly are pleased with its work, we noticed that not all families are taking the opportunity to attend the activities. We have asked the centre to explore why this is so. To be able to do this, we have asked the centre to analyse its information more carefully to check exactly who is attending centre. There is a written plan which identifies actions to improve the centre's work. We have asked the manager and the advisory board to set measurable targets so that they can check how well the centre is doing. Also we think that some of you should. We have also asked the centre to help you become more involved in making decisions about the services it offers. Finally, we have asked the manager and governors to develop ways in which they can ensure everyone in the Bedford Central area who needs the centre's help receives it. Even so, we think the centre is making some good improvements; for example, in your children's development. The centre's capacity for further improvement is satisfactory.

Thank you again for your help and we would like to wish you, your children and families the very best for the future.

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