

Inspection report for Pine Cones Children's Centre (Bedford Borough)

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| Local authority | Bedford Borough |
| Inspection number | 406965 |
| Inspection dates | 23–24 January 2013 |
| Reporting inspector | Catherine Stormonth |

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| Centre leader | Janice Payne |
| Date of previous inspection | Not applicable |
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| Linked school if applicable | Not applicable |
| Linked early years and childcare, if applicable | Not applicable |

The inspection of this Sure Start children's centre was carried out under Part 3A of the Childcare Act 2006 as inserted by section 199 of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009.

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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 an additional inspector and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with centre staff, representatives of the local authority, partner agencies, parents and carers, the headteachers of Livingstone Lower School and Edith Cavell Lower School and members of the advisory board. A meeting was held with a manager from Spurgeons and the local authority.

The inspectors observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

Pine Cones Children's Centre was opened in June 2008. The centre has been managed by Spurgeons in the last 9 months. Another charitable sector organisation has been awarded the contract to manage the centre from the beginning of February 2013. The centre is led by a centre co-ordinator and she is supported by two family workers and administrative staff. An advisory board comprising of an acting chairperson who is a local councillor, several key professional partners including two headteachers and other community groups oversees the work of centre.

The centre is based in a refurbished Victorian school building adjacent to Livingstone Lower School. The building is large, bright and attractive and there is space for outdoor learning and development. There is an outreach service at a local church community centre supporting the health visitor clinics held fortnightly.

The centre serves three Bedford wards including the Harpur, De Parys and Brickhill wards. The reach area served by the centre is socially diverse with a lower super output area of Harpur which has multiple deprivation ratings that place it in the highest 10% of deprivation categories in the country. The De Parys and Brickhill wards are more mixed parts of the town with pockets of deprivation.

There are 1,112 children living in the reach area. The majority are from White British, Asian, Black African and Caribbean and mixed race backgrounds with an increasing proportion of children from a range of other minority ethnic backgrounds including Polish and other Eastern European countries. Children come from backgrounds where in the Harpur ward in particular half are living in poverty and a similar number are living in households dependent on workless benefits. Housing is mixed but the Harpur ward has a high proportion of flats and twice the local average for overcrowded households. Children's abilities and skills on entry to the early years provision are mixed but overall are below age-related expectations.

Inspection judgements

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

Overall effectiveness

The effectiveness of the children's centre in meeting the needs of and improving outcomes for families

3

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

3

Main findings

Pine Cones is a satisfactory children's centre. It is a welcoming centre run by dedicated staff who aspire to serve their community well. The families that use the centre appreciate the good quality support and guidance they receive and the difference this has made to their lives. One mother said that she felt that she had 'got her life' when she was helped to cope with some early parenting issues.

Over 70% of families are registered with the centre and the majority using the services, activities and programmes are some of those who are most in need of intervention and support. The main issue for the centre is that the data provided during the inspection shows insufficient families in the target groups, including families from minority ethnic backgrounds, lone parents and workless families, are engaging with the centre on a regular basis. Most of the services the centre provides are of good quality and the outcomes for individuals who use them are usually good. The numbers attending are low, however, and the overall effectiveness of the centre's work is diminished by this. The latter has resulted in all of the inspection judgements being satisfactory because the centre is not reaching enough families. Reductions in local resources limit the opportunity for outreach programmes and family worker caseloads are not able to stretch to engaging with sufficient targeted and hard to reach families. The centre does have higher engagement than the Bedford Borough average but leaders were not aware of how their user attendance compares with national children's centre user engagement statistics and

expectations.

The centre has taken many reasonable steps including promotions, open days and using parent volunteers who speak a variety of mother tongue languages to increase centre user numbers but the local community is proving hard to engage. Local mobility is also high and this makes the centre's work more difficult when families are transient and are re-housed to other locations and are hard to keep track of. The location of the children's centre to Bedford town centre means that some users are from other children's centre reach areas who enjoy and benefit from the services provided.

Overall outcomes are mainly satisfactory but the impact of services is not measured effectively to establish how successful the centre is. Evaluation evidence presents a mixed picture of improving outcomes. Information is not collected or collated in a format to show the full impact of the centre's work and help leaders to set consistently challenging targets for improvement within planning. For instance, there is no doubt that mothers who smoke during pregnancy and their partners are referred to the local 'Stop Smoking' services but there is no evidence to indicate who has actually given up or reduced their smoking levels. In contrast, children who attend are making particular progress in their personal, social and emotional development and communication and language. This is due to the well-qualified centre staff who plan appropriate programmes and develop 'family books' and track children's learning and progress effectively in readiness for starting school. Those children in most need who have learning delay through disabilities such as hearing impairment are identified early and support is signposted to specialist health services. There is satisfactory provision and channelling to relevant employment, training and education for adults to help them improve their qualifications and their confidence to seek work but the numbers are low.

The centre places a high priority on safeguarding families. Staff work with some agencies, such as the specialised assessment centre Rishana Homes and the local women's refuge, to reduce the risk of harm to children especially when domestic violence is an issue. Arrangements for safer recruitment and health and safety are good but high mobility makes it difficult to always know the whereabouts and family circumstances of all the most vulnerable children.

The governance of the centre is sound and the advisory board has a good range of local organisations and partner agencies that form a cohesive and useful overview of the centre. The centre staff work well together to ensure the smooth running of the centre from day to day. The local authority provides adequate support to the centre but confusion about supplying and using data has not always been helpful. Centre leaders have a broadly accurate view of the centre's strengths, though without evidence of impact, their self-evaluation and improvement planning lack rigour. Leaders are realistic about what is required to improve the satisfactory overall effectiveness of the centre. The switch to another children's centre management provider shortly and higher local authority user engagement targets, together with motivated staff with proven commitment to further development, indicates that the

centre has satisfactory capacity for sustained further improvement.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Develop more effective ways of increasing user engagement especially for targeted groups which include families from minority ethnic backgrounds, lone parents and workless families in centre programmes and activities.
- Improve ways of collecting and analysing data by liaising with the local authority, partner agencies and monitoring how well outcomes for centre activities are improving the lives of target families.
- Improve self-evaluation processes to help define areas for development to ensure that the 'operational plan' contains some specific, measurable and relevant challenging targets for improvement.

How good are outcomes for families?

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The outcomes for users are satisfactory set in the context of low user engagement throughout, particularly for children from target and more vulnerable groups. The centre has inconsistent statistical evidence to demonstrate precisely the impact of services offered.

Families benefit from sessions that promote healthy living such as the 'Baby Brasserie' to promote sustained breastfeeding which has commendably risen 17% in the last year. Parents confirmed that their children are eating healthier snacks and drinks and more vegetables as a result of attending the 'BeeZee' tots course. Universal health services, such as midwife antenatal checks and health visitor clinics, operate out of the centre so that mothers-to-be and mothers of young babies are introduced to the children's centre at a very early stage in family life.

Users say that they feel safe at the centre and the staff give parents good advice on health and safety in the home. Good use is made of the Common Assessment Framework processes for recording and coordinating multi-agency support programmes but for very low numbers of families. The family workers' case files illustrate how effective the support is in helping parents to become more confident and successful in managing their family lives. The centre is effectively supporting families with children on the child protection register and children in need when they receive all relevant information from social services.

Children behave well and all at the centre show a respect for one another. Parents and carers say that their children enjoy all of the activities. 'It's the best two hours of the week', said a group of mothers. 'Wiggles and Rhymes' and 'Explore Together' sessions give children and mothers opportunities to socialise and feel less isolated. The centre has good arrangements for transition to school to ensure that children are well prepared. The 'PUPs' programme and excellent links with Livingstone Lower

School are particularly helpful in this regard. The Early Years Foundation Stage Profile scores show that some children who access services at the centre still have low starting points when they transfer to school but achieve better than those who do not, particularly in their personal, social and emotional development, and communication, language and literacy. These scores are above the local authority average as the centre is helping to narrow the achievement gap between different groups of children especially the lowest achieving 20% of children.

Parents express a good level of satisfaction with the centre through a variety of surveys. The parent representative on the advisory body represents parents' views and suggestions well but the numbers of suggestions are small and the impact parents make in decision making is satisfactory overall. Some limited numbers of adult users benefit from opportunities to gain qualifications, for example, through 'The Magic Pathway Course' in literacy and numeracy skills. The centre recognises that there remains scope to increase adult involvement in training and education and individual parents are signposted to the Bedford College for further education and vocational training. Other useful signposting includes Jobcentre Plus services for employment and the Citizens Advice Bureau for help with housing, benefit entitlement and debt management.

These are the grades for the outcomes for families

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| The extent to which children, including those from target 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 children and parents, including those from target groups, 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 parents, including those from target groups, contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre | 3 |
| The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents, including those from target groups, are developing economic stability and independence including access to training and employment | 3 |

How good is the provision?

3

The provision of services is satisfactory overall. The majority of the activities, services and opportunities have broad appeal but some are targeted when needs arise and parents request help with issues such as weaning and potty training. Outreach services are conducted through home visits and the 'Baby and You Health Visitor Drop In' which takes place in the children's centre and in a local church community centre. The children's centre, in collaboration with partner agencies, is effective in identifying the needs of vulnerable children and their families but user engagement is low. The centre is not sufficiently effective in ensuring services are

matched to needs when only a fifth of users in the reach area are served at present.

Assessment is used well when using the 'Support Circle' holistic approach to recording any developmental concerns and to show progress made by families over time. A strength of this system is the accurate starting points and the tracking tool used to monitor the progress of individual children. Assessment is used adequately elsewhere when activities are evaluated but this information is not used sufficiently to plan and set targets to improve further. Many of the activities offered by the centre promote purposeful learning for all children who attend. The 'family books' are a good way of recording learning and working with parents to support and improve their children's development further. The crèche gives parents valuable quality time for their own learning so that they are able to concentrate when attending the high quality adult courses that are run. The centre provides good sessions and activities which promote learning. For example, 'Explore Together' is a session which provides messy play with a sensory and tactile approach and other resources for pre-school children. Parents find this extremely helpful because the children can experience lots of creative activities which are not easy to implement in the home. The 'Wiggles and Rhymes' features music, singing and fun noise-making which successfully promotes communication with babies.

Centre staff are sensitive to the needs of families, and users state that staff often 'go the extra mile' to support them effectively especially in times of crisis. A range of information leaflets is available to parents and covers a variety of topics. These help parents and carers meet the physical, emotional and nutritional needs of their children. Staff know its users by day-to-day contact rather than through information supported by data and analysis. The inclusive approach and welcoming environment ensure that once users attend the centre, they go on to engage with many of the different services. Individuals confirmed some successful support and guidance enabling parents to improve the quality of their lives. Guidance to targeted families is, however, limited by the low user engagement.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

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| The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of families, including those in target groups | 3 |
| The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups | 3 |
| The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups | 3 |

How effective are the leadership and management?

3

The centre has seen some big changes to the management structures in recent times as a result of a switch to Spurgeons and is getting ready for yet another change to in two weeks' time to another charitable provider. Individuals are preparing for the changes and currently leadership and management are satisfactory. There is a

committed and enthusiastic staff team whose expertise and skills are being used to improve services further. Professional supervision and performance management are regularly undertaken and valued where staff are under pressure with reduced resources. Governance through the advisory board is satisfactory and has a good representation of partners but is not yet fully holding the centre to account. It is clear from the testimonies of partners that the centre plays a pivotal role in bringing services together to improve the life chances of children when they have contact with more vulnerable families.

Equality and diversity are satisfactorily promoted. Children with disabilities are adequately catered for and outcomes are satisfactory for this group. Staff try hard to remove any barriers for all users to the activities and services on offer. The centre is open to families who want to drop in to use the kitchen and other facilities especially when they are housed in difficult circumstances such as one-room bed and breakfast accommodation. The management team is aware that, currently, user engagement could be increased and has tried many strategies for increasing numbers coming to the centre with mixed and often disappointingly low response rates. In addition, managers recognise that without more robust use of data, the centre cannot be certain it is meeting the needs of all reach groups. Senior leaders and managers are motivated to seek further improvement through self-evaluation processes that involve staff and partners' input and user surveys that adequately monitor some progress and outcomes to set priorities and targets but this aspect is underdeveloped. The local authority has confirmed that further improvements are needed and is setting new performance criteria shortly.

Safeguarding arrangements are satisfactory and meet the statutory and local requirements. The centre pays good attention to safer recruitment and health and safety checks and risk assessments are thorough. All staff working in the centre receive suitable safeguarding training and they know what action to take in the event of a safeguarding issue. Protocols and practice for sharing information between the relevant agencies are in place but in a highly mobile population it is occasionally difficult to keep track of some vulnerable families who move out of the area without warning. The centre's engagement with families overall is satisfactory. The low engagement of the harder to reach and targeted families is a cause for concern, especially when vulnerable families are not accessing relevant and good quality services to improve their lives. There is no doubt that the families that use the centre support the work and the direction of the centre and their views are taken into account in developing the provision. A parents' forum has not been successfully established but there is parent representation on the advisory board to enable an effective contribution to the development of services and decision making.

Resources and accommodation are used well and what is provided meets users' needs. The centre offers satisfactory value for money.

These are the grades for leadership and management

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| The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day-to-day management arrangements are clear and | 3 |
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| understood | |
| The effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secure improvement in outcomes | 3 |
| The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups | 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 partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services provided by the centre to meet its core purpose | 3 |
| The extent to which the centre supports and encourages families in the reach area to engage with services and uses their views to develop the range of provision | 3 |

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

The inspection took account of the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile scores and attainment on entry data from local lower schools when judging aspects of children's achievement.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Pine Cones Children's Centre (Bedford Borough) on 23–24 January 2013. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

During this time, we talked with parents, staff, partners and members of the local authority and other managers linked to the children's centre. We also observed the centre's work and looked at a range of documents.

Those of you we spoke to told us that you enjoy using the centre and that it has made a positive difference to your lives. You also told us that you find staff at the centre very friendly and helpful. All centre staff are good at guiding you and referring you and your children to other activities and services they think you would also benefit from and enjoy. Many of you shared with inspectors how you value the

relationships you have built with the family workers and the difference they have helped you make to your lives and the lives of your children. The centre currently offers a sufficient range of services and activities for families in the area, which are led by skilled and dedicated professionals. In order to develop the centre further, we have asked the staff to look more closely at what you and your children are achieving and measure the impact the centre's work is making on your lives. Collecting this information will help ensure that the centre develops an action plan to improve what it can offer you. We have also asked the centre to make sure more of those vulnerable and harder to reach families are being supported.

You told us that you think that the centre is a safe place for parents and carers and their children. Inspectors agree with this view and found that staff work hard to ensure the health and safety of all who use the centre. Safeguarding is given appropriate attention and all the arrangements fulfil legal requirements. The staff help you to support your children's learning and development at home by providing services which encourage you to engage in play with your children from a very early age. Many of you shared with the inspectors how staff support you through the early education programme using the 'family books' learning journeys. Some of you have made some suggestions on activities you want. Some of you are members of the advisory board so that you can be directly involved in decision-making, governance and evaluating the work of the centre. This helps you channel your views to influence future planning.

The centre's management structures work well for the smooth running of the centre from day to day. We have asked that the centre's operational plan contains sharper and more measurable targets based upon the identified needs within the centre reach area, the take-up of services and the impact of those services on outcomes for children and their families. We want the advisory board to provide challenge to the centre to ensure that it is offering sound quality and an effective service to a wider range of families in its reach area.

We would like to thank everyone who came to speak with us. It was a privilege to be able to talk with you. Your honesty and openness helped us immensely during the inspection. We are very grateful for your help and we wish each of you every success for the future.

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