

Inspection report for Pear Tree Children's Centre (Bedford Borough)

Local authority	Bedford
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Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
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Linked school if applicable	Balliol Lower School URN 109464
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Hastingbury Pre-school EY358218

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 staff and senior managers from the centre and representatives from Bedford local authority and Spurgeons. Inspectors also met with parents as well as members of the advisory board and a number of partners including those from health, education and employability services.

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

Information about the centre

Pear Tree children's centre is a phase two centre designated in 2008. It is one of two centres in Kempston, in the borough of Bedford. It is located on the site of Balliol Lower School. The school provides before and after school care, in the centre, which is subject to a separate inspection. Hastingbury Pre-school provides childcare on the same site and is also subject to a separate inspection. The centre meets its core purpose through a range of services offered directly at the centre or at outreach venues.

The centre serves Kempston and Wootton wards, including the village of Stewartby. The reach area served by the centre is socially diverse with areas of relative affluence and areas of deprivation with two super output areas in Kempston South being amongst the 30 per cent most deprived in the country. The reach area also includes a Traveller's site. The majority of families are of White British heritage, although an increasing number of Eastern European and Asian families now live within the reach area. There are 950 children under five years old living within the area.

Unemployment and low educational achievement are features of the area. However, the centre does not have precise data about the number of children living in households dependent on workless benefits or of families claiming the childcare

element of Working Tax Credit. Local housing comprises a mix of social housing, privately rented or privately owned accommodation. Children’s skills and abilities on entry to early years provision are generally below age-related expectations.

At the time of the inspection, ‘Spurgeons’, a charitable organisation, provides management and governance of the centre on behalf of the local authority. Another charitable sector organisation has been awarded the contract to manage the centre from the beginning of February 2013. An advisory board comprising professional partners, local councillors and community members oversees the work of both children’s centres in Kempston.

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

The centre’s overall effectiveness is satisfactory. There is strong team working among staff with a clear commitment to do their best for the community. Participation is increasing and 58% of families are registered with the centre. The vast majority of families accessing services and activities at the centre are some of those most in need of intervention and support. However, data indicates that not enough families, including those in some target groups such as workless families, lone parents and families from minority ethnic backgrounds engage with the centre on a regular basis.

Provision is satisfactory overall with good quality care and support for those families that use the centre. This result in some families, especially those suffering domestic abuse, being given effective guidance and timely interventions that help improve their lives. One parent told inspectors; ‘I came to this area to escape domestic violence. The staff have given my child and I so much support we now have our confidence back and can see a future here.’ Partnerships, particularly with the co-located school, health visitors and social care are helping to steadily improve outcomes for families. Families benefit from being able to access clinics and other health programmes which are jointly planned by health professionals and centre staff.

The centre's promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. Parents from a range of social, cultural and ethnic backgrounds feel welcomed and included in activities at the centre. The engagement of children from Traveller families in targeted outreach provision demonstrates well the centre's ongoing commitment to inclusion. Good advice and support from the early years advisor is helping to develop provision, improve educational outcomes and steadily close the achievement gap for children.

Parents benefit appropriately from specific programmes that help build their confidence and the good modelling of behaviour by staff during sessions helps them to manage their children's behaviour positively. The volunteering programme and learning opportunities offered at the centre help parents build their skills and enhance their employability and economic well-being. However, monitoring of the progress, achievements and destinations of adults who access further learning opportunities or employability advice is incomplete. As a result, insufficient priority is given to targeting low-income and workless families to help improve their economic well-being.

Parents' contribution to the daily life and development of the centre is satisfactory, for example through their feedback following activities. However, despite repeated attempts the centre has had difficulty in engaging parents to become involved in strategic decision-making.

Leadership, management and governance are satisfactory. The manager sets high expectations and draws well on local knowledge and other useful information to help plan the centre's provision. However, evaluations of the centre's effectiveness lack accuracy because not enough use is made of specific data to check how well services engage and improve outcomes for all target groups. Despite this, the centre generally knows its strengths and areas for improvement and has plans in place to take the work of the centre forward. For these reasons, the centre's capacity for sustained improvement is satisfactory.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Sharpen self-evaluation and action planning by increasing the use of data to set precise, measurable and challenging targets and by rigorously monitoring how well outcomes are improving for all target groups.
- Develop strategies to increase the engagement and participation of key target groups, in particular, workless families, lone parents and those from minority ethnic backgrounds in centre services.
- Increase monitoring of the success rates for adult learning, training and employability opportunities and target workless and low income families, in order to further improve their economic well-being.

- Develop strategies to support and involve parents in a parents' forum or equivalent structure and their participation in the work of the advisory board.

How good are outcomes for families?

3

The centre works closely with health visitors and social care professionals to promote the safety of families. Case studies concerning families with children subject to a child protection plan, demonstrate that the centre contributes effectively to positive outcomes for these children. Centre staff and their partners use the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) process appropriately to identify welfare needs of families and to secure the appropriate support from a range of agencies. As a result, families engaging with the centre, particularly those suffering domestic abuse, improve their ability to stay safe. This outcome is currently satisfactory rather than good because at the time of the inspection the number of families receiving direct support from the centre was low and limited due to a staff vacancy during the change of managing organisation.

Parents satisfactorily improve their understanding of health through activities such as 'Tiny Times', and through attending health clinics. The centre has made a positive contribution to reducing obesity rates by providing weaning advice and by promoting the value of physical exercise during activities such as 'Beezee Tots' cooking sessions which also includes dietary advice. One parent said: 'I didn't know that I can wean my baby with the same food as we eat, such as pureed apples and carrots.' The level of obesity in reception-age children is reducing and is around the national average. Breastfeeding rates at six to eight weeks in Kempston South at 37.3% are lower than the Bedford and national average, although in Wootton at 59.3% they are higher.

'Stay and Play' sessions appropriately support children's and adults' learning and development. Children's behaviour and social skills development are good. The tracking of the progress made by children who have attended the centre when they transfer to the next stage of their education shows that they achieve better than those who have not. The gap between the lowest achieving 20% of children and the rest is reducing over time. Six in every ten children in the reach area achieved a good level of development across the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile in 2012, which is slightly lower than both the local and national average of 64%. Adults' personal development and learning are satisfactory. They benefit appropriately from parenting programmes and some adult learning opportunities offered at the centre. Some adults improve their parenting skills through attending specific courses while others participate in courses that help build their literacy and numeracy skills. English for speakers of other languages courses usefully increase participants' confidence in learning a new language.

Through informal discussions, the centre gathers views from parents. However, the

centre has not been able to establish a parents' forum or actively involve parents in governance, for example as members of the advisory board.

The centre's established link with employability services enables the sharing of information about pathways to further learning with adults. However, few parents access sign-posted employment advice for themselves. Volunteering opportunities, adult learning and first steps courses are helping to improve the confidence and economic well-being of some families. However, the centre does not sufficiently prioritise this area of work or target low income and workless families and is not yet fully tracking the achievements and progress of adults.

These are the grades for the outcomes for families

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

Centre staff have a good understanding of the challenges and barriers they face in trying to meet the needs of the community. They use local intelligence appropriately to assess and analyse needs and to plan provision that is responsive to the needs of an increasing number of local families. However, the centre has not yet devised sufficient ways to engage with some of its key groups such as lone parents and families from minority ethnic backgrounds. Outreach provision is developing securely which helps families who are reluctant to travel across the reach area to the centre to still benefit from its services. The centre is engaging with traveller families through the provision of outreach play sessions delivered at the Traveller site. The centre recognises that further outreach work requires development to widen families' access in some communities in its reach area, and has plans in place to extend its services.

The centre works productively with the early years advisor to plan appropriate activities for children that incorporate Early Years Foundation Stage programmes of learning. The range of activities planned enables parents and children from different

target groups to enjoy learning. Parents comment positively about their children becoming 'more confident' and having improved social skills as a result of the centre's work. Adult learning activities are offered by the local college and voluntary providers. Through appropriate signposting some parents have progressed to further adult learning courses. However, most benefit from learning through activities provided by the centre, such as 'Tiny Times', which combine good quality learning about health matters with personal development opportunities.

When crisis arise, families that use the centre are confident that they will receive good care, guidance and support. Case studies and personal testimony from parents confirm that as a result of the intervention and support they receive, they overcome barriers and are able to make positive changes to their lives. 'They have been great. I can't thank them enough'; was the comment from one parent which reflects the positive views of others. Centre staff work closely with a range of information services and external agencies to ensure that families receive specialised support and care as required. Child minders access support from the centre which helps improve the quality of the work they do to ensure the well-being of the children they look after.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

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	2

How effective are the leadership and management?

3

Leaders, managers and staff have a sound understanding of their roles, responsibilities and accountabilities. The centre runs efficiently on a daily basis and governance arrangements are satisfactory. The centre works productively with a range of partners representing health, education and social care to provide integrated services to meet local needs. Local councillors, professional partners and community members play a key role as advisory board members in steering the work of the centre. The small staff team are closely supervised by the centre manager who carefully monitors their work with families. However, some documentation concerning their supervision is incomplete.

Self-assessment processes usefully involve staff, and partners on the advisory board and local authority monitoring visits provide a basis for further evaluation of the centre's effectiveness. However, there is limited challenge to the centre's performance. This is because data is not routinely used to keep track of how well key performance indicators are being met and too little attention is given to checking the

impact of the actions being taken to improve outcomes for all target groups. Nonetheless, at all levels, leaders and managers are committed to improving the quality of provision and to increasing the centre's engagement with families most in need of their support. The local authority recognises that further improvements are needed and is in the process of introducing new target setting and performance criteria for its centres.

Safeguarding arrangements are satisfactory. Signposting and referral mechanisms are used to ensure that an appropriate response is made whenever safeguarding issues arise. Statutory requirements in relation to safeguarding and safer recruitment are appropriately met and multi-agency work is effective. Recruitment and Criminal Records Bureau checks are carried out as required and staff have completed appropriate safeguarding training. Families affected by domestic violence receive timely support to help protect and keep them safe. Spurgeons area managers conduct useful centre safeguarding audits.

The centre offers a welcoming and inclusive environment. Families treat each other with respect and relationships are harmonious. Typical of parents comments is; 'Everyone here is treated just the same. It doesn't matter about the colour of your skin or your background. They are fair with everyone.' Equality and diversity is satisfactorily promoted and statutory obligations are appropriately met. Families with disabled children receive satisfactory support to ensure that any potential barriers are minimised. Data show that the achievement gap between the lowest-achieving 20% of children in the Early Years Foundation Stage and the rest is narrowing and at 28% in 2012, is slightly below the national average and the Bedford average of 29.2%.

The centre's engagement with users is satisfactory and surveys and consultations are used to collect their views. However, a parents' forum has not been successfully established, and the centre has not established other means of ensuring that parents' views contribute effectively to the development of services. Outreach provision is satisfactory and continually being improved so that more of the target families can benefit from the centre's services.

The use of resources has a satisfactory impact on outcomes for users. Accommodation is suitable and those families engaging with the centre state that the provision meets their needs. As a result, value for money the centre provides 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 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	3

effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	
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

Findings from the most recent inspections of Balliol Lower School (URN 109464) and Hastingbury Pre-school (EY358218) were used to inform the judgements made during this inspection.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Pear Tree Children's Centre (Bedford Borough) on 23 - 24 January 2013. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

Many thanks for contributing to the inspection of your children's centre. We found the centre to be a welcoming place. You told us how much you and your children enjoy attending activities organised by the centre. You also told us that when problems arise in your lives, centre staff are supportive and this helps you be better parents. We agree with you that the centre is the right place to go if you need help or guidance. However, we have asked the centre to find ways to increase the number of families who engage with its services as the numbers are low for some groups living in the community.

From our observations, we could see that families enjoy attending sessions and learning together. Some of you have attended adult learning courses that enhance your skills such as literacy or numeracy and some of you have benefited from employability advice. It is great see some of you working as volunteers at the centre. However, we have asked the centre to do more to monitor adult's

participation and success on courses and to increase their focus on helping workless families to become better prepared for work.

We are pleased that many of you benefit from attending health clinics and also enjoy sessions such as 'Beezee Tots' and 'Tiny Times'. Evidence shows that your centre helps children to become better prepared for school and they achieve at least as well as others of the same age as a result. You also told us that your children have developed their social skills and become more confident as a result of attending activities held at the centre.

The centre works well for everyone in the community, irrespective of their background or disability and is increasing the participation of those who most need their support. We found that the centre is keen to promote equality and diversity. Families treat each other with respect and everyone seems to get on well together at the centre. The centre listens to you and asks you what you think of the services and activities it offers. We are pleased that the centre consults with you and asks your opinions. However, not many of you are involved in decisions about the way in which the centre is run and we have asked the centre to try and establish a parents' forum and to support and encourage parents to become members of the advisory board.

The manager sets high expectations and the staff team are united in their commitment to do their best for the community. The centre has a satisfactory grasp on its strengths and weaknesses. However, there is incomplete use of data to measure the full impact of its work and set precise improvement targets. We have asked the centre to improve the use of data so it can more carefully monitor the full impact of its services on the families and set targets for improvement.

Once again, many thanks for contributing to the inspection. We thoroughly enjoyed spending time at your centre, meeting you and your children, and we wish you and your families all the best for the future.

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