

Bedford Borough-Network 4

Balliol Lower School, Balliol Road, Bedford, MK42 7ER

Inspection date	4–5 June 2013		
Overall effectiveness	This inspection:	Requires improvement	3
	Previous inspection:	Not previously inspected	
Access to services by young children and families		Requires improvement	3
The quality of practice and services		Requires improvement	3
The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management		Requires improvement	3

Summary of key findings for children and families

This children's centre group requires improvement. It is not good because:

- Staff do not have sufficient knowledge of the Early Years Foundation Stage. In some activities, support workers do not demonstrate clearly to parents how they can support their children's learning and development during sessions and at home.
- Although a large majority of families receive support, some parents who might benefit from the centres' work are not using the services on offer. These are parents who bring up children on their own and those who have children with a disability.
- The local authority do not provide comprehensive data about families who live in very challenging circumstances. Consequently, there are risks that children in these families are not accessing the support they need early enough to improve their lives and well-being.
- Although the care and guidance for families with a high level of needs are suitable, a few plans to support them do not show clearly enough who is doing what and whether problems are being addressed quickly.
- The local authority and the advisory board are not checking the quality of services carefully enough. Some activities are fairly recent and, in some aspects, the difference the centres make to improving outcomes for children is unproven.

This children's centre group has the following strengths:

- Access to activities for young parents and childminders is good. The quality of the sessions for these young mothers is also good because activities provide opportunities to learn about safety, healthy eating, breastfeeding and general child development. The themes covered to support effective parenting are broad ranging and meet participants' needs well.
- Staff have developed strong links with professionals from many agencies, in particular schools, early years providers and health visitors.
- Many parents told inspectors that they feel welcomed at all times and are very impressed by the commitment of staff. Help at times of trauma in their lives is good. Parents often commented on how confident they now felt looking after their children. They value sharing their concerns with other parents and professionals working at the centres.

Information about this inspection

The inspection of this children’s centre group was carried out under Part 3A of the Childcare Act 2006 as amended by the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009. The centres that form part of this children’s centre group are Pear Tree Children’s Centre and Daisy Hill Children’s Centre.

This inspection was carried out by three of Her Majesty’s Inspectors.

The inspectors held meetings with the centres’ manager, senior leaders in the local authority, health and education professionals, outreach workers, early years practitioners, volunteers and representatives from the advisory board. They also spoke to parents and looked at outcomes of satisfaction surveys. They observed the centres’ work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Inspection team

Marianick Ellender-Gelé	Her Majesty’s Inspector, Lead Inspector
Susan Crawford	Her Majesty’s Inspector
Joy Law	Her Majesty’s Inspector

Full report

Information about the group

Services for children and families in Bedford Borough are delivered through four networks. The charity '4Children' manages Network 4 on behalf of the local authority. The two centres in this network share leadership and management. There is one advisory board for the two centres and one centre manager who has the responsibility for the day-to-day management of both centres.

Pear Tree and Daisy Hill are phase two centres designated in 2008. They are located on the sites of two lower schools, Balliol Lower School and Bedford Road Lower School. The schools provide before- and after-school care, which are inspected separately. Hastingbury Pre-school provides childcare on the Pear Tree site and this is also subject to a separate inspection. The network meets its core purpose through a range of services offered directly at the centres or at outreach venues.

The centres serve Kempston and Wootton wards, including the village of Stewartby. Very recently, the centres have begun to serve the parishes of Kempston Rural and Stagsden, approximately five miles away from Kempston. The area is socially diverse with pockets of relative affluence, but some neighbourhoods are in the 30% most deprived nationally. The area also includes a Travellers' site. About 1660 children under five years old live in the area. The majority of families are of White British heritage, although an increasing number of Eastern European and Asian families now live in Kempston. About 290 children live in households dependent on workless benefits or in families claiming the child element of Working Tax Credit. Children's skills, knowledge and abilities on entry to the Reception Year at school are below those expected for their age.

What does the group need to do to improve further?

- Improve children's learning so that they do well at pre-school and school by:
 - developing staff's understanding of the Early Years Foundation Stage
 - engaging parents fully during sessions so that they guide their children through learning activities and continue this good work in their home.
- Increase access to services for single parents and families who have disabled children.
- Work with the local authority and other partners to gather good data on families with the highest levels of need so that they receive help as early as possible to avoid issues escalating to statutory social care intervention and, for families already known to the centres, improve the quality of plans to solve problems more quickly.
- Improve leadership, governance and management by:
 - checking the quality of all activities more carefully
 - increasing the level of challenge that the local authority and the advisory board provide to managers
 - evaluating the impact of services to identify gaps, measure progress and improve outcomes for all children and families.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Requires improvement

- For the large majority of families, including childminders and young parents, access to early childhood services is good. However, not enough single parents and families who have children with a disability use the centres. The Development Centre in Kempston is specifically designed to provide services for disabled children, but links between Network 4 and the Development Centre are not strong enough. Consequently, these two provisions do not know whether gaps in services for

disabled children are filled.

- Data sets provided by the local authority have gaps in information which results in insufficient information on children who live with adults who offend and adults who have mental and health needs, including those with addiction to drugs and alcohol. Consequently, managers cannot promote access and improve participation of these families.
- All families are welcomed regardless of their background, and staff do not tolerate any form of discrimination. Parents commented positively on the way staff readily talk with them. However, a few mothers lack confidence. Inspectors noted that, during some sessions, workers have insufficient strategies to bring parents into the group if they have only recently joined the session.
- The area covered by Network 4 has only recently been extended to families living further afield in Kempston Rural and Stagsden. Families from the Traveller community are accessing a range of services, and an officer from the local authority's Gipsy and Traveller Service visits the site. Links with Network 4 are only just beginning and it is too early to see whether they are effective.
- Support workers signpost families effectively to relevant services locally. For example, one mother said that she was 'over the moon' when attending Project 229 offering her good opportunities to develop her resilience and confidence. Access to English courses for speakers of other languages (ESOL) is easy because Bedford College offers sessions locally or at the college. Crèches enable parents and carers to attend.
- Front-line staff are highly committed. The workers who support families in their own home encourage parents to access activities at the centres so that they do not become isolated and can make friends. Many mothers said that help had been fantastic at times of trauma, such as when fleeing domestic abuse. Family support workers establish trusting relationships with expectant mothers at the earliest opportunity and visit them at Bedford Hospital.

The quality of practice and services

Requires improvement

- The quality of some activities is not always good because staff have insufficient knowledge of the Early Years Foundation Stage. The way staff help parents to support their children's learning in the centre and at home is not precise enough. A Family Pathway process and Progress Wheels are used to track families' progress, however they are not yet fully embedded.
- Despite on-going support, obesity levels in the area are still too high. The frequency of buggy walks is low. Health outcomes, however, are improving. Group sessions and one-to-one advice to promote healthy eating and support mothers who breastfeed are regular. Immunisation rates are good and there are frequent opportunities to learn about general child development.
- The balance between universal services and targeted services to improve outcomes for children and families is adequate. Network 4 is well resourced. The environment is bright and safe. However, some materials are not used effectively to maximise learning opportunities. For example, the book and home corners are not exciting enough and books are not well presented. The outdoor space is excellent, but staff do not routinely plan activities for children and parents to play outdoors.
- Early years providers and the lower schools work together to develop children's communication, language and literacy skills. However, although closing, the gap between the achievements of different groups of children is still too wide and levels of development at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage are below average on entry to Reception. Actions to train staff and improve their professional knowledge are not effective enough.
- Children make steady progress in developing their personal, emotional and social skills. They learn the importance of sitting around tables to eat and how to manage their personal needs such as getting dressed and using the toilets. One father said that his son had problems sleeping and support workers 'sorted it in two weeks'. In these aspects, the centres prepare children well for formal schooling.
- Professionals from many agencies work together to support the most vulnerable families. Health visitors and centre staff, for example, routinely do joint visits and provide one-to-one support to families where relevant. However, actions, such as those agreed through the Common Assessment Framework (CAF), are not precise enough. A few plans are weak because they do not show clearly who is going to do what and by when.

- A growing proportion of families develop their independence and confidence and, therefore, their employment prospects are improving. The Fledglings group, giving early childhood advice to expectant and new mothers, is popular. Guidance on welfare benefits, jobs and training opportunities is readily available.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

Requires improvement

- The local authority is not checking and evaluating the quality of services carefully enough. In the recent past, the annual reviews have not provided a sufficient level of challenge to leaders. The advisory board is very supportive and members know the area well. However, training for board members is insufficiently rigorous and they are not ensuring that what is happening across the network is consistently effective and making a difference to families lives.
- Now that the reorganisation of the children’s centres in Bedford Borough is complete, arrangements for governance, leadership and management are clear. The manager is highly committed and staff morale is high. Relationships with partner agencies, particularly health and education professionals, are good. As a result, the potential for the network to become good or better is strong.
- The use of the Common Assessment Framework to provide early help to families in need is underdeveloped. While staff liaise with social workers when children are on a child in need or child protection plan, actions and timelines to tackle issues are not always clear enough in the plans. Safeguarding children is given top priority across the network, and the centres uses comprehensive policies to promote children’s safety. Staff receive good training and work well with partners to reduce the risk of harm to children, including those known to social care services.
- The centre manager uses information, such as day-to-day evaluation of activities, parents’ views and regular supervision of staff, to monitor performance and improve services. However, the local authority is providing insufficient data about children who live with adults who offend and adults who have mental and health needs. Consequently, leaders cannot check whether support for these children is good enough.
- Resources are managed and used efficiently to meet agreed local priorities. Support is targeted where it is needed, but some groups are still not being reached because data is either incomplete or not used well enough. Leaders have done their best to ensure that cuts to staffing are not unduly disrupting the support for children and families, while ensuring that money is not wasted.

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	Practice consistently reflects the highest aspirations for children and their families and as a result inequalities are reducing rapidly and gaps are closing.
Grade 2	Good	Practice enables most children and their families to access good quality services that improve children’s wellbeing and achieve the stated outcomes for families.
Grade 3	Requires improvement	Performance is not as good as it might reasonably be expected to be in one or more key areas.
Grade 4	Inadequate	The needs of children and families in its area are not being met and/or the leaders and managers are not providing sufficient challenge to bring about improvement to the quality of services.

Children's centre group details

Unique reference number	80261
Local authority	Bedford Borough
Inspection number	423311
Managed by	The 4Children charity on behalf of the local authority

Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	1660
Centre manager	Helen Letting
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Telephone number	01234 303457
Email address	helen.letting@4children.org.uk

This group consists of the following children's centres:

- 20906 Daisy Hill Children's Centre
- 22339 Pear Tree Children's Centre

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