

The Bridges Children's Centre

13 Winchester Circle, Kingston, Milton Keynes, MK10 0BA

Inspection date		13–14 November 2013	
Overall effectiveness	This inspection: Previous inspection:	Requires improvement	3
		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 is a centre that requires improvement. It is not good because:

- The number of lone and workless families that access appropriate services is growing but is not high enough.
- The centre does not make best use of all available data to help shape a balanced programme of activities and track the longer-term impact of its work on improving the outcomes for priority families. There is insufficient analysis of families who do not engage with services.
- Childhood obesity levels remain stubbornly high despite the centre's actions to help families eat more healthily and take regular exercise.
- Staff turnover, including the coordinator's absence, together with computer and internet problems, have hampered the centre's effectiveness. The dip in performance has not been picked up quickly enough or acted on by the local authority. The advisory board's membership has dropped and it is not meeting its terms of reference. The board is rightly reviewing how it can work more effectively.

This centre has the following strengths:

- The centre has registered the large majority of families living in the reach area and engages well with new mothers, fathers and families from minority ethnic backgrounds. New birth data are now received regularly and this enables the centre to make early contact with priority families.
- High status is given to safeguarding matters. First aid training and safety in the home courses are well attended and help parents understand their responsibilities in keeping children safe.
- Partnership working and family support have a positive impact on reducing inequalities and improving the life choices and well-being of families.
- Parents hold the centre in high regard and play a key role in its life and development.
- Leadership is clear about what needs to be improved and self-evaluation is accurate and realistic. The team is building in strength and skills and bringing new ideas to focus the centre's work. There is good capacity to move the centre forward at a more rapid pace than before.

Information about this inspection

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

This inspection was carried out by two additional inspectors.

The inspectors held meetings with the centre coordinator, officers from the local authority, partners, and members of the advisory board and parents. Several activities were observed by the inspectors including two jointly with the centre coordinator who also attended all team meetings.

Inspectors looked at the centre's self-evaluation, service delivery plan, improvement priorities, a sample of case studies, safeguarding policies and procedures and a very wide range of other documentation.

Inspection team

Lead inspector, Christine Field

Additional Inspector

Lesley Talbot-Strettle

Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about the centre

The centre opened in 2009 as a phase 3 stand alone centre and delivers a range of services to meet its core purpose. It is located on a retail park and shares a building with Kingston Day Nursery (URN: 141837) which is subject to a separate inspection.

The centre coordinator has been in post for four years and oversees the work of a small team that has experienced significant changes since January of this year due to absences and staffing changes. A new full-time family support worker joined the centre in July following a period of interim and supply cover for this role. The staff team now comprises a coordinator, a full- and a part-time family support worker and an administrator who works for 10 hours per week. The centre shares an early years teacher with six other children's centres, during term time only. The centre is managed directly by the local authority supported by an advisory board which has partner, parent and centre representation.

The centre serves a mixed area of mainly private housing with some rented accommodation and small pockets of social housing. Families are mainly White British with a third from other ethnic groups. The centre's reach area includes five Super Output Areas (SOAs) of which one falls into the 30–40% most deprived nationally (Woughton on the Green). Around a fifth of families claim out-of-work benefits and nearly a quarter is eligible for the childcare element of Working Tax Credit.

There are 821 children under four years of age living in the centre's reach area. Children enter early years provision at levels below those expected for their age.

The centre has identified its priority groups as lone parents, vulnerable children and families, including those who are workless, children at risk of being obese, ethnic minority families and fathers.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

- Increase the proportion of families accessing appropriate centre services, particularly the priority groups of lone parent and workless families.
- Improve the use of data to help shape services and achieve a balanced programme by:
 - accessing planned training to enhance the team's analysis of data, particularly to identify priority families who do not engage regularly with appropriate services
 - establishing systems to assist the efficient management of data and enable the close tracking of the impact of the centre's work on priority children and families.
- With health and early years partners, work effectively to reduce the level of childhood obesity to meet or better the levels seen nationally.
- Strengthen governance by ensuring that the advisory board's terms of reference are met, and that the local authority follows up quickly any areas for improvement identified by its monitoring and provides the support required to ensure the centre's good effectiveness.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Requires improvement

- The centre has worked effectively to double registrations to 64% over the last year, but has yet to look in sufficient detail at which families attend services and why some priority groups do not. For example, data show that fewer lone parents than other priority groups access services. In contrast, the majority of workless families have regular contact with the centre but few are accessing services designed specifically to enhance their employability.
- Partnerships with health professionals have strengthened in recent months. These are already

having a positive impact on the centre's work with priority families, including those expecting children, across the reach area. New birth data are now received regularly. This has proved effective in enabling the centre to register families, pick up any concerns new parents may have and explain the wider services available to them.

- Family support work is well targeted and results in the most vulnerable families accessing good quality help from centre staff, who draw on appropriate specialist help as required.
- The centre is welcoming and inclusive. Staff are sensitive to the differing circumstances of parents' and children's lives and take positive steps to break down any barriers. The centre engages with the large majority of families from different ethnic backgrounds, who appreciate the ways in which their cultures are valued and celebrated. For example, displays welcome everyone in their mother tongue and themed sessions such as Diwali, Christmas and Chinese New Year involve sharing food, appreciating music and enjoying creative experiences.
- A high number of parents have been helped to complete applications by the centre staff. Most two, three and four year olds are taking up free good quality education, including that provided at the adjoining nursery. The centre's developing 'School Readiness' programme has potential to support children's smooth transfer to other early years settings.

The quality of practice and services

Requires improvement

- Staffing difficulties have hampered some planned developments such as the delivery of a programme that addresses the needs of target groups and balances it with services that are open to all. The new team is well placed to move on this quickly using the well-conceived plans for making necessary change. 'Munchkins', a group facilitated by the centre and now run by parents themselves, is a good model for further supporting outreach work in the community.
- There are many activities provided by the centre aimed at improving families' health, such as guided walks, weekly 'Socatots' and 'Crafty Cooks' sessions; some run at weekends so that fathers can attend. A range of partners, including health visitors, help to raise parents' awareness of other health issues such as weaning, diet and oral hygiene. Nevertheless, at 13% the level of childhood obesity is higher than the local authority average or seen nationally.
- Staff use their knowledge of the Early Years Foundation Stage to provide suitable opportunities for children who attend 'Stay and Play' sessions. They plan specifically for meeting the needs of target children in order to reduce inequalities. Sessions are greatly enjoyed and parents' feedback shows there are positive outcomes, for example in extending children's social skills as a result of sharing snack time together. However, staff do not have a full picture of the impact being made. This is because they do not track the all-around progress children make or check up to see how well target children achieve in the next stage of their education.
- The volunteering programme is well established and helps parents to access further training and employment. Currently four volunteers work alongside the centre staff, which helps them to gain valuable work experience. Links with 'ACE' (Adult Community Education) assist families to enhance their life choices and chances, but little information is shared about what impact courses have on improving the outcomes for priority groups such as workless families. A strategic partnership with Jobcentre Plus has recently been arranged by the local authority; this will enable the centre to signpost its families to relevant services.
- New parents attend 'Baby Calm' and breastfeeding support sessions in good numbers. Nearly 50% of new mothers continue to breastfeed their babies after six to eight weeks, which is above local and national averages and is a positive feature in supporting families' well-being.
- The level of care, guidance and support offered to families is good. A range of well-attended courses, including first aid, successfully raises awareness about how to keep children safe. Over 170 fire alarms have been distributed to improve home safety. Parents speak very positively about how supportive the centre is, particularly when they face personal challenges in their lives such as post-natal depression or need help with managing their children's behaviour.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

Requires improvement

- The pace of improvement has been adversely affected by absence and staff changes and this has affected key aspects of the centre's life including leadership. Nevertheless, self-evaluation is robust and the centre's view of its strengths and areas requiring improvement is accurate. Well-targeted plans are now in place to drive forward necessary change. The new team, operational since July, is upbeat and positive about the future.
- Problems raised with the local authority about poor computer hardware and weak internet connection have not been acted on quickly enough. These issues have now been resolved, but the coordinator and staff have yet to undergo the training on analysis and use of data, which is necessary to help them fully get to grips with their roles. Centre performance is kept under review at specific intervals during the year by the local authority, with challenging targets set to support better effectiveness. However, dips in performance are not followed up rigorously.
- Governance arrangements are well embedded. There is strong partner and parent representation on the advisory board, but minutes show that only a handful of members routinely attend meetings. The quorate requirement set out in the terms of reference has meant that no decisions could be taken. The Chair is currently considering questionnaire responses from members about the changes required to improve attendance and restore both the support and the challenge to the centre that the board provides.
- Supervision and appraisal are clearly linked to staff development. Staff resources are appropriately deployed and augmented by the effective work of volunteers. The use of community venues to put on activities enhances the compact facilities at the centre, and financial resources are added to by parent contributions and the fees paid for student placements.
- Safeguarding is given high status in policy and procedures, and centre display promotes the message that 'Safeguarding is everybody's business'. A range of information is readily available to parents experiencing particular problems such as domestic abuse. The centre works collaboratively with partners to reduce the risk of harm to vulnerable children, including those subject to child protection plans, looked after children, and those in need and who receive help using the Common Assessment Framework procedures.
- Parents and children are consulted about their needs and any changes to services. The parents' forum has a key role in centre decision-making. Four parents have recently been appointed to the advisory board which is promising.

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 details

Unique reference number	21692
Local authority	Milton Keynes
Inspection number	428588
Managed by	The local authority

Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	821
Centre leader	Audrey Russell
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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