

# Bedford Borough Network 1 Children's Centres

Queens Park Children's Centre, Marlborough Road, Bedford MK40 4LE

<b>Inspection dates</b>	4–6 June 2014
<b>Previous inspection date</b>	Not previously inspected

<b>Overall effectiveness</b>	<b>This inspection:</b> Previous inspection:	<b>Requires improvement</b>	<b>3</b>
		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:

- Although the number of parents accessing centre services is improving, centres are not yet reaching enough children, especially in urban areas or in those rural areas where there is identified disadvantage.
- The network does not have a clear strategy to help adults to improve their learning or gain qualifications that will help them to find work.
- Children's levels of development remain stubbornly low in the Queens Park and Pine Cones areas. Planning does not clearly show learning intentions or focus sufficiently on children's communication and language development.
- The number of staff vacancies in the network results in some popular sessions being delivered by one member of staff limiting their impact on families. The quality of staff's practice during activities is variable.
- Some partnerships and information sharing protocols are under-developed. Some partners do not ensure the group receives all the information it needs to target its work effectively.
- The role of the recently reformed advisory board is not yet clearly understood by all those attending, and parents' views are under-represented.
- Signage in centres is not clear enough to inform adults of the mobile phone policy or improve their understanding of e-safety. Staff do not always follow guidelines for building security.

### This children's centre group has the following strengths:

- The quality of support provided by family practitioners for individual families, including those in crisis, is good and effective.
- A strong performance management cycle supported by clear needs analysis feeds into a well-targeted action plan.
- Staff are supported well in their work with families. Case files are in good order and monitored by managers. Staff have opportunities to discuss cases and raise concerns appropriately.

## What does the group need to do to improve further?

- The children's centre network should develop an adult learning strategy that effectively meets the needs of local families by:
  - considering the kind of work available in the area so that training courses enable adults to develop skills that will allow them to access local employment opportunities
  - providing clear information on further training courses and learning opportunities for parents completing parenting courses
  - assisting adults to gain qualifications that will enhance their ability to access work.
- The children's centre network should review the deployment and support for staff who run sessions so that:
  - staff have sufficient time to support children's learning
  - staff can spend time with those families who need their advice or guidance
  - staff are able to deliver sessions to a consistently high standard
  - volunteers are able to support staff in centres and help them deliver activities.
- The children's centre network should improve the engagement of all children but especially:
  - children from Queens Park and Pine Cones Children's Centres reach areas
  - those who need to develop their communication and language skills
  - children who live in pockets of disadvantage within rural areas.
- The local authority and children's centre network should improve information sharing protocols between partners and children's centres to:
  - make it clear to centres which families in their reach area are involved with social care
  - ensure centres know how many families with two-year-olds are eligible for and/or have applied for funding
  - clarify to parents that they should go back to their children's centres for support where funding is refused.
- The children's centre network should improve planning and assessment for children's activities so that:
  - plans include clear learning intentions and measurable outcomes for activities
  - plans and assessments include children's next steps that will meet their individual needs
  - there is a focus on children's speech and language in all sessions
  - assessments are linked to the Early Years Foundation Stage outcomes to help measure children's progress towards the early learning goals.
- The children's centre network should ensure that all users of centres are aware of the policy on the use of mobile phones and cameras, e-safety and building security by:
  - providing clear signage in all centres to remind visitors of the policy
  - promoting e-safety so that parents and their children are more aware of the potential dangers of sharing information as well as bullying, and inappropriate content
  - ensuring that doors in areas used for activities in the centres are open and closed at the appropriate times to restrict movement around the centre by children and adults.
- The children's centre network should improve the effectiveness of governance arrangements to ensure:
  - advisory board members understand their role as 'critical friend' and are able to provide sufficient challenge based on clear priorities
  - parents are sufficiently well represented on the board and their views are included.

## 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 Bluebells Children's Centre, Clapham Children's Centre, Meadows Children's Centre, Pine Cones Children's Centre and Queens Park Children's Centre.

This inspection was carried out by two of Her Majesty's Inspectors and two Additional Inspectors.

The inspectors held meetings with the two interim network managers; health workers; a headteacher and nursery teachers; family practitioners; the chair of the advisory board; volunteers; parents; and representatives from the local authority, Asian Women's Aid, children's social care, adult and community learning, and early years settings.

The inspectors visited all five children's centre buildings. They observed the centres' work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

## Inspection team

Denise Blackwell Lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Deavon Baker-Oxley	Her Majesty's Inspector
Deborah Sanders	Additional inspector
David Baber	Additional inspector

## Full report

### Information about the group

Bedford Borough Network 1 consists of five children's centres. The network covers two urban wards in Bedford town where the two larger centres are located. The three rural centres encompass villages on the fringe of the town, together with a large, sparsely populated area. All five centres are co-located on school sites and there is also co-located childcare provision on the Queens Park site. The schools and childcare are inspected under different arrangements. Their inspection reports can be found on the Ofsted website [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk). The centres are managed by 4Children on behalf of Bedford Borough Council. Prior to 4Children taking on the management of Network 1 in February 2013, the children's centres in Bedford were all run as stand-alone centres. A recently re-structured advisory board now covers all five centres in the network and is made up of partners and parents.

There are four networks in the borough. Network 1 is the largest in relation to geographical size and the second largest in relation to numbers of children. There are currently around 2930 children under five years of age within the reach area of the network. Children's levels on entry to early years provision vary considerably from well below expected levels in urban areas to at and above expected levels of development in some rural areas.

Network 1 has a very diverse population. Around 84% of families with children under five years of age in Queens Park ward come from minority ethnic backgrounds. This reduces to around 5% in Risley ward. Levels of deprivation vary considerably from some areas within the reach of Queens Park and Pine Cones Children's Centres being within the 30% most deprived in the country to some of the least deprived in the rural areas. However, while the rural area is generally affluent, there are pockets of rural deprivation. Over 30% of children under five years of age live in households claiming out of work benefits in some of the urban areas, reducing to under 5% in some rural areas. Priority groups for the network include families from minority ethnic backgrounds especially those who speak little or no English; families living in deprived areas and/or isolated communities; and families who are in receipt of out of work benefits, especially those with low or no qualifications that will support them to access work opportunities.

The two centres in urban areas are open full time, while the three centres in the more rural areas offer part-time provision. Midwifery and health visitor services are delivered through the centres. Outreach work to support vulnerable families and families in need of additional support is provided by the network. Adult learning and parenting sessions are provided in Queens Park centre though parents can attend any of the centres in the borough for adult learning courses.

## Inspection judgements

### Access to services by young children and families

### Requires improvement

- The large majority of two-year-olds entitled to funded places access them. However, where parents apply directly to the borough, centres are not informed about applications. When parents apply through centres, good records are kept of which children are awarded funding and any support that is put in place for those who are unsuccessful. Where funding is refused to applicants who apply directly to the borough, the local authority does not refer parents back to the children's centre for support. As a result children who may benefit from attending centre activities are not always identified and parents who are refused funding may be left unsupported.
- The network is not always informed about children who are involved with social care. Social workers do not routinely consider how children's centre services can complement their work with families who might need extra help and support. However, where centres are informed of and involved with children subject to a child protection plan or children in need, families generally remain engaged until children start school.
- Recent changes in the information management system mean that data are not yet robust enough to show whether the attendance of target groups is accurate. However, centres have been supplied with a comprehensive network profile which helps them to identify target groups and plan their services appropriately. Managers make regular contact with families who are registered but not accessing services, and parents and partners share valuable information about the area ensuring services are matched to needs. The numbers of children accessing services in most rural areas is improving but this is not the case where there is disadvantage.
- Strong relationships with health visitors and midwives, whose services are delivered from children's centres, ensure that a majority of children are registered with children's centres. The percentage of parents registered and accessing centre services, including those who are pregnant, is much higher than that for children. This is due in part to the numbers accessing English for Speakers of Other Languages courses and parenting programmes. The percentage of children accessing services in urban areas is particularly low as children do not have access to crèche provision while parents attend courses.
- Outreach work has been effective in making contact with some hard-to-reach groups. Staff at Pine Cones have made contact with an Asian Women's refuge and provide support in building confidence and engaging with mainstream activities. . This has been key in helping many women gain independence and work.

### The quality of practice and services

### Requires improvement

- There is no clear overall adult learning strategy. Adult learning is strongly focused on parenting courses and developing skills in English. However children do not benefit from time in the centre while parents attend courses to improve their English. As a result parents and children do not get opportunities to improve their English together.
- Parents told inspectors how attending parenting courses had helped them to understand their children's development and support their children's learning. However, there is little local intelligence about the kind of work available or a clear understanding about the link between low skill levels, qualifications and economic well-being. There is no clear progression route for adults who are keen to develop their learning further or who wish to access training programmes that lead to qualifications.
- Planning, observation and assessment of children's development and progress are variable across the

network. Some activities establish good-quality assessments of children's learning, but others lack a robust monitoring and tracking system. Activities for parents with their children are generally well attended and popular, providing a good range of play opportunities. However, there is insufficient detail in planning about what children should be learning and insufficient focus in plans on developing children's communication and language. Next steps for individual and groups of children are not always clear and evaluations of activities are too descriptive.

- Several groups run with only one member of staff, giving little opportunity for them to talk to parents or record their observations of children's learning. Volunteers are under-utilised, and the quality of practice in activities is variable. While parents value the work to prepare children for school, not enough is being done to improve children's language and communication skills. As a result, too many remain poorly prepared for school, especially in the Queens Park area.
- Centres work closely with partners to improve health outcomes for families. Physical fitness and cooking sessions, along with work with the dietician, have a particular focus in reducing obesity rates. However, the social breastfeeding workshop is not well attended, and sustained breastfeeding rates remain low. As a result, the network is not having sufficient impact on improving health outcomes for all families and children.
- Case files are well ordered, regularly monitored and have a consistent flow to the content, with clear contact logs and lists of key people involved in each case. More complex case files show good multi-agency working and involvement of external expertise where needed. Families testify to the good levels of support provided by the network and this is also evident in case files.

### **The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management**

### **Requires improvement**

- Centre management changes have had a negative impact on staff morale and partnerships. Managers from the organisation 4Children have rightly concentrated on supporting staff through a period of significant change and reductions in personnel and services. Universal services have been rationalised enabling better use of limited resources with a stronger focus on target families and those most in need of support.
- Safeguarding policies and procedures are clear and staff know what to do if they suspect abuse of children or vulnerable adults. Appropriate checks are carried out on staff and volunteers, and clear records are kept of partners' suitability. Where centres know about children subject to child protection plans or families with children in need, they work collaboratively with social care services to reduce the risk of harm.
- Some photo policies are displayed in centres but are not sufficiently clear about the use of mobile phones or cameras in centres, especially for families who have no or little English. There is not yet enough promotion on safe use of the internet. Although the security of buildings used for activities is generally good, staff do not always follow guidance on building security. However, before the end of the inspection, clear signage had been put up in most centres, and building security had been reinforced with staff.
- Managers have a strong self evaluation process in place and this ensures that families' needs are analysed and target groups identified. A detailed delivery plan is supported by a comprehensive project plan enabling a clear analysis of what is working and what is not. A strong staff performance and quality assurance cycle picks up performance issues and results in targeted support for staff, ensuring they better contribute to the overarching network targets. The local authority works closely with the children's centres to resolve issues. They are fully aware of performance issues and the impact this has had on the quality of services.

- The advisory board has gone through a significant amount of change, reducing from five boards to one in January this year. Advisory board minutes show partners share information and ask questions but are not yet clear about their role to challenge the network based on the priorities in the development plan. Parent forums are well attended, their views help to shape services and feed into the advisory board. The new chair has a good understanding of the needs of families and is ambitious for the community. However, the new arrangements are still in the very early stages, there are still too few parents on the board and it is too early to see if they are making a difference.

**What inspection judgements mean**

<b>Grade</b>	<b>Judgement</b>	<b>Description</b>
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**

<b>Unique reference number</b>	80271
<b>Local authority</b>	Bedford Borough Council
<b>Inspection number</b>	444612
<b>Managed by</b>	4Children on behalf of the local authority

<b>Approximate number of children under five in the reach area</b>	2930
<b>Network Manager</b>	Catherine Mercer (Interim Manager)
<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	Not previously inspected
<b>Telephone number</b>	01234 210440
<b>Email address</b>	Catherine.Mercer@4children.org.uk

**This group consists of the following children's centres:**

- 20459 Bluebells Children's Centre
- 20739 Clapham Children's Centre
- 21974 Meadows Children's Centre
- 22379 Pine Cones Children's Centre
- 22449 Queens Park Children's Centre

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