

Inspection report for Bluecoat Children's Centre

Local authority	Devon
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Inspection dates	5–6 July 2011
Reporting inspector	Alex Baxter

Centre governance	Bluecoat Church of England Infant and Nursery School, and Children's Centre Governing Body
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Linked school if applicable	Bluecoat Infant and Nursery School
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 representatives of the centre's governing body, including parents, and with the local authority and the senior management and leadership teams. Other partnership agencies linking with and visiting the centre and members of the staff and users of the centre were also consulted.

The inspectors observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation including key policies, the centre's self-evaluation documents, its development plans, evaluations of services and data about people who use the centre.

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

Information about the centre

Bluecoat Children's Centre started as an Early Excellence Centre in 2002 before becoming a Phase Two Sure Start Children's Centre in 2006. The children's centre is now part of Torrington Learning Community which includes 13 schools. This children's centre is attached to the Bluecoat Infant and Nursery School. The responsible body for Bluecoat Children's Centre is the governing body of Bluecoat Infant and Nursery School and Children's Centre. A children's centre committee was formed in the summer term 2010 to oversee all aspects of development and provision.

Through its various partnerships, Bluecoat delivers the full core offer and a range of additional services, including health, maternity and outreach, and parent and family support services.

Bluecoat Children's Centre currently serves communities within the market town of Great Torrington and a range of villages in the outlying rural area. The range of neighbourhoods it serves reflects a broadly average level of social and economic disadvantage as seen in the proportion of children entitled to free school meals and families with the main wage earner out of work. While there are increasing numbers of families in social housing, with low incomes and requiring benefits, particularly in Torrington, they are below average in comparison with the areas served by some other children's centres. However, there are pockets of deprivation and rural isolation across the community supported by the Bluecoat Children's Centre. The area served by the children's centre is made up predominately of families from a White British background, although there are an increasing number of families from mainly White European backgrounds, where English is an additional language.

Children's skills on entry to the Early Years Foundation Stage provision are generally below those expected for their age, especially in communication and language and in personal, social and emotional development.

The centre comprises a modern, purpose-built range of facilities. These encompass a spacious entrance area, which it shares with the infant and nursery school, and various office, consulting, conference and activity rooms. The centre also includes a large café/lounge area, sensory room and baby-changing facilities. Facilities also include an adjacent extended services building which provides office and consulting rooms for the health team and another activity room, which is also used for early years activities and voluntary run breakfast, after-school and holiday clubs.

The centre also utilises community venues within its reach area to deliver children's centre services. These include amongst others, Torrington Scout Hall and School

Rooms and village halls in Beaford and Shebbear, and Taddipport, Winkleigh and Monkleigh.

This inspection also took account of the inspection findings from the section 5 inspection of Bluecoat Infant and Nursery School, which took place on 12–13 January 2011.

Overall effectiveness

The effectiveness of the children’s centre in meeting the needs of and improving outcomes for users and the wider community

1

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

1

Main findings

This is an outstanding children’s centre that plays a pivotal and highly respected role in serving the needs of its community. Much work has been successfully completed in bringing all services and users together as one learning community. The centre and its very closely linked partner school are central to the vision of ‘encouraging active participation and placing services and support for families at the heart of the community’. Bluecoat fully lives up to this clear commitment and strives to do even better.

Exemplary team leadership and management by the headteacher of the infant and nursery school and the leader of the children’s centre are complemented by high-quality governance, which fully represents all members of the community. Together, they ensure that services continue to become even more effective in helping families, particularly the most vulnerable. In addition, the centre’s improved and very effective engagement with an increasing number of families from minority ethnic backgrounds and its regular festival days fully illustrate its highly inclusive ethos and welcoming approach, which sustain equality and diversity extremely well.

The centre has excellent arrangements for safeguarding users. All who use or work at the centre or at its outreach locations say they feel very safe and that their children are also kept very safe while attending activities. Very effective partner working, for example with health, midwifery and school staff, means that health and safety are given the highest priority. Efforts to support families in crisis or where there is the possibility of domestic violence are guided by rigorous adherence to agreed practice and very effective liaison with key agencies to reduce the risk of harm to children.

Many users make excellent contributions to their community, at all levels of governance, including within a monitoring group, and by working as volunteers within the centre. This is actively encouraged by staff who instil them with

confidence and skill. For example, several young mothers assist with breast-feeding groups. Users also offer suggestions and complete assessments of the support they receive at the end of sessions. They do so willingly, for, as one parent said, 'Staff are friendly, are receptive to our ideas. Yes, our views are valued.' This means staff gain useful insight into their effectiveness and shape future services accordingly. Similarly, outreach services now take place in village halls as well as schools because some families feel more comfortable in these venues. This has boosted users' attendance, including fathers, and enhanced parenting skills and healthy living.

The centre can demonstrate great success in lifting parents' confidence, developing their understanding and adoption of good health and safe practice, and extending parenting skills. However, while the centre has had significant success in training up volunteers, some parents still lack the skills to pursue further training and job opportunities. Staff are highly effective in promoting the children's learning and development, especially the children's enjoyment of learning and personal development. Staff are emphasising the development of children's speech and language at every opportunity; however, given the often low starting points, the centre continues to target these needs.

By tenaciously adapting services and placing more of them in the community, the centre has significantly extended its reach, strengthened what it has to offer and, consequently, more families are being supported successfully. This determined commitment to do the very best it can for families, accompanied by a track record of accelerating progress in recent years, shows that the centre has an outstanding capacity to improve further.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Develop the services provided to raise parents' aspirations, thereby enhancing their readiness to access education, training and employment and lifting their ability to enhance their children's speaking and listening skills.

How good are outcomes for users?

1

Outcomes are impressive in their rate of improvement and are particularly outstanding in relation to the progress users make in their health and personal development. The structures which form the governance of the centre and the diligence of senior staff ensure that at every level, users are routinely engaged in decision making and that their skills in communicating their views are very well supported. All users interviewed, including for example, parent members of the governing body, firmly expressed the view that their contributions are really valued and are used to shape services, such as the planned 'Summer Olympics' programme.

The centre has clear statistical evidence to show how provision is significantly

improving the health of families in the local area, including those considered hard to reach. For example, data now show that very good partnership working between the staff of the centre and the midwifery team is increasing breast-feeding. Clearly seen, not only by more young first-time mothers choosing to breast-feed, but also by experienced mothers who previously preferred not to breast-feed, now choosing to do so. Similarly, very effective partnership/integrated working at the child health clinics and during home visiting promote and monitor parents' and children's health, development and emotional well-being very successfully.

Parents and their children learn to adopt healthy living extremely well, for example when they attend the café, where the café manager provides well-balanced meals and models healthy eating. Similarly, parents and their children make excellent progress in being healthy and in understanding healthy, safe living when participating in the many learning and play opportunities provided. For example, in the centre's very well-equipped indoor and outdoor areas, when greatly enjoying a picnic lunch during the 'Bear Hunt' or by attending the various venues across the community, for example 'Stay and Play' sessions at Beaford.

Excellent, trusting and caring relationships with staff help parents and their children to feel valued and confident when accessing the centre's services. Exemplary procedures for safeguarding children, which include an increasing and very thorough implementation of the Common Assessment Framework and close partner working with schools and social services to protect those considered most vulnerable, help the children and their parents to feel very safe and secure during activities at the centre, at outreach venues and during home visits. During the very well-planned first registration visits to users' homes, centre and partner outreach staff are also diligent in further securing children's welfare by advising families how to stay safe at home, including for example, by delivering leaflets and, as necessary, encouraging parents to seek home safety checks from the fire service.

All parents spoken to during the inspection made it abundantly clear that they feel very safe at the centre and learn greatly from the sensitive guidance they receive from the staff. Another parent, reflecting the views of others, commented, 'These sessions are a lifeline for us in the community.' They talk about their growing self-confidence and of their increased awareness of how to keep themselves and their children healthy and safe. These improving skills were clearly seen, for example, in the way that mothers, grandmothers and carers joyfully and tenderly supervised babies so that they could play safely during 'Little Adventures' and 'Stay and Play' sessions.

Observations of learning and play activities showed the children's excellent behaviour and relationships. The centre's detailed assessments of children's learning and the regular evaluations completed by users at the end of sessions also show outstanding progress in personal and social development, and improving and now good progress in language and communication. Observations of children with special educational needs and/or disabilities, including in the link school's Nursery, also showed that they are fully included and, in relation to their needs, make the same progress as other

children. Parents and children from minority ethnic backgrounds are also included sensitively and achieve just as well in relation to their differing starting points.

Users' responses and children's centre evaluations show that families make good progress in learning to manage their economic well-being, with individual counselling advice and informal discussions during centre activities being much appreciated. Although now located in Bideford, records show continuing effective use of Jobcentre Plus services by local families. Increasingly, centre staff, particularly, for example, the parent support adviser, are encouraging and helping parents to access training, further education and, if appropriate, to seek employment opportunities. In addition, to good effect, all the centre's activities now stress the importance of developing the children's speaking and language skills, and are developing parenting skills in this aspect. For example, at the 'Beaford Toddlers', children greatly enjoyed learning and made good progress in speaking and listening because the outreach worker introduced singing and story sessions using a puppet. By these means, parents and their children grow greatly in confidence and develop good skills for the future. However, although improving, often from low starting points in terms of skills and confidence, the speaking and listening skills of some children, and the readiness of some parents for training and/or employment, are not high enough.

The extent to which children, including those from vulnerable groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles	1
The extent to which children are safe and protected, and their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	1
The extent to which all users enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	2
The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships and users contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	1
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents are developing economic stability and independence including access to training and employment	2

How good is the provision?

1

Exemplary relationships and high-quality pastoral care lie at the heart of all that the children's centre does. Increasing self-referrals show the high regard and value placed on the quality of the support provided by the children's centre within the mindset of the local community. Interviews with parents during the inspection revealed some heart warming examples of how families in crisis have been greatly supported and now feel absolutely confident in using and working with the centre to help not only their own families, but increasingly other families too. All staff work collaboratively to complete whole-family assessments to ensure sharply targeted support; by this means, they empower parents to develop the skills and resilience which prevent them from repeatedly experiencing crisis.

All staff at the centre use assessment very effectively to meet the complex range of needs of families in their area. As a result, all users make excellent progress in their personal development and good and improving progress in other areas such as communication skills. Strong partnerships with other services, especially midwives, health workers and schools, increasingly as part of the wider learning community of 13 schools, ensure that all families accessing services, but especially the most vulnerable, are supported extremely well. For example, the staff's increasing implementation of procedures outlined in the Common Assessment Framework is helping to keep children safe in families where there has been domestic abuse. Other children with additional emotional, health or language needs are also supported very effectively.

The centre has made substantial progress in recent years in reaching out and making contact with families across the local and wider area that it serves. Even more contact with families has been achieved over the past year through strengthened partnerships, including with the midwifery team, and aided by the use of up-to-date local authority data collection systems and more precise registration procedures by staff. Evaluations and data now show more fathers, young mothers and childminders using the centre and making very good gains in developing self-esteem and parenting skills, and in greatly enjoying their time with their children at the centre and increasingly at home. As one father said, representing the thoughts of other parents, 'I love it, this is fun!'

The activities provided by the children's centre promote great enjoyment, and provide excellent learning and development opportunities for all users. This is enriched significantly by the way staff celebrate users' achievements through a range of certificates, such as those for 'Cooking for Life.' These are much appreciated by parents and children alike, especially when they are celebrated through the local press and posters. In addition, the cafe is a hub of happy personal learning experiences. The key to the parents' and their children's excellent learning development is the strong impact on users' personal skills, notably their self-esteem and confidence, well-being and parenting skills. Data show that users are now attending more sessions and, importantly, by improving the quality and adapting services, staff are more effectively supporting vulnerable families in greatest need.

Examples include specific sessions for young mothers so that they feel at ease with their own peers. Improvement has also been aided, for example, through the increasing use of venues to locate services more accessibly across the community served by the centre, such as village halls or schools at Taddiport and Winkleigh. Such developments are enabling the centre to make contact with and support hard-to-reach groups such as teenage parents and families new to the area. Regular users, for example, perceptively observe that some younger parents often find visiting a village hall less formal and initially easier to attend.

Staff are lifting children's speaking and listening skills, for example by regularly

singing rhymes at 'Stay and Play' sessions and by modelling effective questioning and discussion to parents. Data show improving impact, but that improved strategies have not been in place long enough to develop skills to the full. Evaluations also show very successful promotion of parenting skills and of parents becoming volunteers, with for example, seven volunteers currently supporting their peers in the breast-feeding support group.

Case study records show that the centre is engaging successfully with an increasing number of parents from minority ethnic backgrounds and with those families living in isolated rural areas. This is accomplished by providing welcoming 'Stay and Play' activities across the community and by increasing home visiting and outreach support. In addition, by responding positively to users' views, the centre has ensured that some mother and toddler groups, previously in danger of closing because of a lack of resources and expertise, are enabled to continue. Staff use the centre's minibus and van effectively to transport stimulating resources, much appreciated by parents and their children. Inspection observations, such as at Monkleigh, included children's expressions of awe and wonder as they entered the hall to see the breadth of colourful, interesting equipment unloaded and laid out for them. Not surprisingly, children and their parents felt valued, enjoyed a boost to their confidence and learned extremely well during this session.

The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users	1
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all users	1
The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of users and the wider community	1
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to users within the centre and the wider community	1

How effective are the leadership and management?

1

The shared structures of governance and senior leadership across the children's centre and its closely linked infant and nursery school are key strengths underpinning outstanding leadership and management. Parents and other members of the community are very well represented at all levels and play a full part in holding leaders to account. The sharply focused work of the central governing body and its various committees, accurately informed by the high-quality evaluations and the determined drive of the headteacher and centre leader, are central to an impressive momentum of improvement. Through close and very effective team-work, members across the developing learning community are using the breadth of their expertise in an innovative and enterprising way to increasingly achieve their vision of meeting the needs of all families within the locality.

As a result, governance and accountability arrangements are very well established

and understood, and ensure excellent value for money. For example, strategic changes to more specifically respond to users' needs and views by tailoring and strengthening services to better serve the most vulnerable are now bringing outstanding outcomes for most users. These include raised self-esteem, increased enjoyment of family life, safe childhood experiences and improved health outcomes, such as healthy eating and increased breast-feeding.

Senior leaders inspire and empower colleagues. With clear guidance from the local authority, these increasingly include very effective joint working with partner services to better support children and their families. Excellent self-evaluation at all levels, importantly and beneficially including from the users themselves, means that the right needs are identified and precise targets are set. For example, the sharply matched support for young mothers and their babies is resulting in some exceptional outcomes, such as reduced risk and feelings of isolation and the replacement of vulnerability with joy and self-esteem.

Evidence from the local authority's challenging analysis of data and the centre's own evaluations show an impressive rise in the number of children registered with the centre and a significant increase in the frequency of families using the centre's services. For example, outreach venues such as Shebbear take services more accessibly into the heart of the community and even when working families are unable to attend, some are encouraging childminders to still bring their children to the centre. By such means, the centre signposts its services and demonstrates its expertise, which in turn lifts users' confidence and has led to a significant increase in family self-referrals and support.

The inclusion of all children and their families is promoted very effectively and discrimination is tackled with vigour. Children with special educational needs and/or disabilities benefit from very effective partner-working between health and education staff. The centre's close links with schools across the learning community and especially with the linked infant and nursery school also ensures that the children make a happy and successful transition into school. In addition, the currently shared focus on lifting children's language skills is more precisely targeting the needs of boys. As a result, the achievement gap is narrowing more quickly than before. The increasing number of families from ethnic minority backgrounds attending groups such as the 'Stay and Play' baby sessions are clearly pleased and lifted by the warmth of the welcome they receive, not only from caring staff, but also from other parents. Outcomes for key target groups, such as those experiencing domestic violence, are improving rapidly and, by carefully monitoring users' responses, staff ensure that parents' and children's individual needs are tackled very effectively. One comment by a parent, who said, 'I dread to think where we would be now without the support of the centre,' typifies the very high level of not only satisfaction, but deep appreciation, expressed by all the users spoken to.

Very close teamwork between the staff of the centre and infant and nursery school ensures that arrangements for safeguarding children and families are exemplary. Comprehensive health and safety checks including detailed risk assessment, for

example, of the café and of the regular visits to the school's outdoor 'Forest School', exemplify high-quality safeguarding practice. Thorough checks have been made on all adults who work as part of the centre and an up-to-date single central record is maintained and rigorously checked and updated as necessary. All partners working at the centre or collaborating with centre staff in providing child protection, outreach and home visiting support to families in the wider, isolated rural community show equal diligence in following agreed procedures to safeguard everyone's health and well-being.

The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day-to-day management arrangements are clear and understood	1
The extent to which ambitious targets drive improvement, provision is integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community	1
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of users and the wider community	1
The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties	1
The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults	1
The extent to which evaluation is used to shape and improve services and activities	1
The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services the centre has been commissioned to provide	1
The extent to which the centre supports and encourages the wider community to engage with services and uses their views to develop the range of provision	1

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

This inspection took account of the children's skills on entry to the Early Years Foundation Stage and the proportion of children eligible for free school meals, obtained from the inspection findings of the section 5 inspection of Bluecoat Infant and Nursery School, which took place on 12–13 January 2011 and from current data of the children now attending Bluecoat Infant and Nursery School. This inspection also took account of the shared governance arrangements for the Bluecoat Infant and Nursery and Children's Centre provision.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Bluecoat Children's Centre on 5–6 July 2011. We judged the centre to be outstanding overall and to be a place where the well-being of parents and their children are supported extremely well and with the utmost sensitivity by very caring staff.

During the inspection, we held meetings with many of the centre's staff and some of the other people who come to the centre to run sessions or to help you. We were also pleased to be able to speak to quite a few of you to find out what you think of the centre and the services it provides and I would like to say a special 'thank you' to those of you who came in specially to meet us. We most certainly took account of your views when we made our judgements.

Without exception, you all told us how pleased you are with the services and activities the centre provides. You told us that the staff show that they care about you and, because of that, many of you have willingly helped at the centre, either as governors, or as volunteers, or also importantly by expressing your views and ideas about how the services could be improved. Because of this, you too should feel proud of what the centre achieves.

We found that because of exemplary leadership and teamwork, the staff and governing body at Bluecoat Children's Centre and its linked infant and nursery school continue to build upon already very supportive practice to help an increasing number of families.

Increasingly over the past couple of years, but especially in recent months, by linking more closely with a range of partners and providers across the area, the active inclusion of the children's centre in the learning community, which includes 13 schools, has greatly enriched the expertise and strengthened the services provided. This raised capability has significantly improved the centre's ability to 'be there' for those families in greatest need. Similarly, by providing outreach services at home and supporting sessions at other venues, more families are able to attend more frequently and are therefore rightly feeling more supported. As a result, Bluecoat shows an excellent capacity to sustain improvements into the future.

We judged almost all the centre's procedures and services to be outstanding. We were particularly impressed by the centre's diligence in keeping your children safe, helping you to live more healthily and, in particular, lifting your self-confidence as parents and so enabling you to quite rightly enjoy being a parent.

Some of you told us that the centre makes a considerable difference to your lives. We were moved by your willingness to share with us just how worrying some of your

problems were and, like you, we are thrilled by your improved feeling of well-being because of the help that you have received from the very caring staff at the centre. We agree with you that the centre has excellent systems for finding out what your particular needs, and those of your children, are and that staff are very good at shaping services so that they meet your needs better.

We also noted that more of you are gaining the confidence to seek additional qualifications and we agree that the centre should continue to help you to develop your communication skills so that you may feel more ready to take up employment opportunities. We also feel that such support would enable some of you to help improve your children's speaking and listening skills. So we have recommended these to the centre's leadership team.

Many thanks again for your time and support during the inspection.

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