

Axe Valley and Honiton Children's Centres

Trevelyan Building, Fore Street, Seaton, EX12 4AN

Inspection date

June 2013

Overall effectiveness	This inspection:	Inadequate	4
	Previous inspection:	Not previously inspected	
Access to services by young children and families		Inadequate	4
The quality of practice and services		Inadequate	4
The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management		Inadequate	4

Summary of key findings for children and families

This children's centre group is inadequate.:

- Leaders and the advisory boards do not make sufficient use of all available information to check, plan and review activities and services. As a result, they do not have a secure understanding of the performance of the group.
- Leaders do not track the participation of those families most in need and therefore the difference that services are making for these groups is not known.
- The group does not have clear priorities for its development and target setting is weak. As a result, the centres are not improving rapidly enough to ensure what they offer is improving the lives of families, particularly those who need the most help.
- The organisation and deployment of staff and services are not well thought out. Consequently, some families who require one-to-one support have to wait too long for the help they need. Others are not able to access relevant services.

This children's centre group has the following strengths:

- The centres' staff come from a wide range of professional backgrounds and demonstrate expertise. They are highly committed to improving the lives of families. There are some instances of very effective one-to-one work with individual families who make significant improvements in their lives.
- The group provides good opportunities for adults to volunteer their services so that they can make a useful contribution to their community and develop their confidence and skills for employment.
- The group is building strong links with a range of relevant partners. These are particularly well established at the Honiton District Children's Centre where, for example, services provided in conjunction with the health authority are effective.

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 Axe Valley Children's Centre and Honiton District Children's Centre

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

The inspectors held meetings with senior leaders and managers in the local authority, the centre leader, the commissioned provider, partner agencies, parents, the outreach workers, family support staff, early years workers, volunteers and representatives of the advisory board.

The inspectors visited the centres' three sites.

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

Inspection team

Jane Burchall	Her Majesty's Inspector, Lead Inspector
Jon Bowman	Her Majesty's Inspector
Denise Blackwell	Her Majesty's Inspector

Full report

Information about the group

Axe Valley and Honiton are a group of children's centres in East Devon run by The Children's Society on behalf of the local authority. The group is made up of two centres: Axe Valley, a phase three children's centre, and Honiton and District, a phase two children's centre. The Children's Society has been responsible for running Honiton and District since 2007, and Axe Valley since April 2012. Each centre has its own advisory board. The centres are currently being managed by a temporary centre leader who is covering the maternity leave of the substantive leader. The centres serve coastal and rural areas, as well as the towns of Honiton, Seaton and Axminster. The towns and villages in the locality cover a geographical area of approximately 152 square miles. Although the area is not identified as being deprived overall, there are pockets of deprivation among areas considered to be more affluent. Levels of worklessness are low overall, although many families are in low income employment. Public transport facilities are sporadic and families in outlying villages are at risk of social isolation. Most of the population is White British, with smaller percentages of families from Black and minority ethnic groups, some of whom speak English as an additional language. Most children in the area start early years provision with skills broadly in line with what is typical for their age, although communication and language skills are often weak. The centres meet their core purpose by offering a range of services which include health services, family play sessions, parenting programmes, adult learning and family support. Services are offered from the main children's centre buildings, a linked site in Honiton and a range of community venues within outlying towns and villages.

What does the centre/group need to do to improve further?

- Together with the local authority, develop and implement action plans that include clear, challenging and measurable targets focused upon the priorities for the centre.
- Improve access to services by young children and families by:
 - making better use of information that is available so that staff have a clear understanding of which groups would benefit from services
 - ensuring all families can easily access the services they need
 - reviewing the delivery of family support work in order that it is more efficient and that families receive a timely response according to their needs.
- Carefully check the extent to which services are improving the lives of families, particularly those most in need, so that the centres can evaluate accurately the difference they are making.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Inadequate

- Leaders do not know if those families who would most benefit are accessing services. They do not make sufficient use of data and information to plan, review and check what they offer to families.
- Staff have worked effectively to take services out to rural areas and to increase the engagement of families in the Axe Valley area. This has led to a good increase in the number of families who now visit the centre. However, families in Axminster are disadvantaged as some services, such as antenatal provision and specific groups for young parents, are not located within easy reach. As a result, not all families in this area are engaging in relevant services.
- A range of partners, including health and children's social care, work well with the centre to identify individual families who may benefit from targeted services, including those expecting

children. Staff know the families they work with well and are successful in maintaining contact with them.

The quality of practice and services

Inadequate

- The monitoring of what the centres offer families is weak. Leaders are not sufficiently checking the impact of services for target groups and therefore do not know if they are making a difference where it matters. Evaluations of services, such as parenting programmes, are ineffective as leaders do not collect relevant information to help assess how effective they are.
- The quality of support for individual children and their families who have been identified as needing one-to-one support requires improvement. Assessments of the needs of families, including common assessments vary too much and too often there are delays in families accessing the support and help that they need.
- Parents value highly the support and help they receive. Sessions such as the Breastfeeding Café and Step-by-Step are extremely popular with children and families. Staff use these sessions to help identify where additional support may be required. Centre staff and volunteers are good role models and provide good care, guidance and support to help parents to make positive changes to their lives including those who have attended parenting programmes.
- Staff use their knowledge of the Early Years Foundation Stage to plan suitable opportunities for children who attend the centres' early years sessions. In Bumps to Baby Buddies, Creepers and Crawlers and Stay and Play, children enjoy learning alongside their parents and a good focus is placed upon improving children's language and communication skills. Although staff seek parents' feedback, they do not have a full picture of the impact of these groups as they are only just beginning to track the progress children make.
- The quality of partnerships with organisations that promote learning and employment are underdeveloped. Opportunities for parents to engage in adult learning courses are limited. The centres do not know how many adults have taken part in courses or what they have achieved.
- Some activities and support to develop employability skills are progressing well. The volunteer programme is managed effectively and the number of parents volunteering is increasing rapidly.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

Inadequate

- The centres are not improving rapidly enough as planning is weak. Information about priorities for development is not readily available or used sufficiently to plan services aimed at helping those most in need. Leaders do not have a clear strategy to demonstrate how they are going to make the necessary changes and have not set precise targets that lead to improvement.
- The local authority sets targets for improvement, but these are not linked closely enough to the priorities of the reach area to bring about improvement where it is needed.
- Resources are not used effectively enough. The vast majority of staff work part time; they each hold a wide range of responsibilities and travel extensively across the wide reach area. This means that there are significant demands upon their time which are difficult to balance and impacts on the centres' capacity to respond to referrals for individual families quickly enough.
- Both centres have active advisory boards whose membership reflects a range of relevant partners, although they have not been successful in engaging parents in governance. While the partners' expertise provides a useful insight into the needs of the community, the board

does not ensure it is provided with the information it needs to fully challenge leaders, hold them to account and secure necessary improvements.

- Arrangements to safeguard users are sufficient. Recruitment and selection procedures ensure that all necessary pre-employment checks are undertaken and staff suitability to work with children is regularly reviewed. Staff know what to do should they have concerns about a child's welfare and support for more vulnerable families, such as those subject to child protection plans or the Common Assessment Framework. This provides important oversight of the welfare needs of children. While risk assessments are routinely undertaken, in one group, staff were observed to allow parents to use their mobile phones in the centre, which is not in line with the centres' policy.
- Staff are given good opportunities to access a comprehensive programme of professional development so that they are knowledgeable and skilled. Despite having been through a significant period of change, such as the joining of two centres and changes in management, they work well together to deliver services to the families who access them.

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.

Select details

Unique reference number	80023
Local authority	Devon County Council
Inspection number	423303
Managed by	The Children's Society on behalf of the local authority

Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	1,825
Centre leader	Karen Bridel
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Telephone number	01297 20542
Email address	AxeValleyCC@childrenssociety.org.uk

This group consists of the following children's centres:

- URN: 20148 Axe Valley Children's Centre
- URN: 21548 Honiton and District Children's Centre

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