

Honiton and Axe Valley Children's Centres

Devon – Locality 1 East Devon, Trevelyan Building, St Clares Close, Seaton, Devon, EX12 2AN

Inspection dates	29–30 July 2014
Previous inspection date	11–12 June 2013

Overall effectiveness	This inspection:	Requires improvement	3
	Previous inspection:	Inadequate	4
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 group of centres requires improvement.

- Both centres in the group are not yet reaching enough children who live in areas of least advantage.
- The focus on children's early learning and development, in planning and delivering activities is not yet effective in reducing inequalities. There is not enough emphasis placed on early reading and preparing children for starting school. Not enough has been done to develop the staff team's knowledge and understanding of promoting early learning opportunities for children.
- The group does not have a clear strategy to help adults to improve their learning or gain qualifications that will help them to find work.
- Leaders and members of the advisory board are not ensuring that the best use is made of available resources.

It has the following strengths:

- Registration figures have risen. This is due to the centre manager providing strong leadership in meeting the centres' objectives and implementing a new staffing structure. As a result, the large majority, 71%, of families regularly access services, helping them to make positive changes to their parenting skills.
- Most eligible two-year-olds and almost all three- and four-year-old children access funded early education in pre-school settings.
- Leaders, members of the advisory board, and the local authority are now making better use of information to check, review and plan activities and services. Their improved understanding of the performance of the group is supporting improvements in services.

What does the group need to do to improve further?

- Provide a wider range of activities that promotes early learning and development, both in the centres and in the local community.
- Increase attendance rates for all families by:
 - taking more activities out to the least advantaged areas
 - promoting early reading and book sharing
 - planning activities to meet children's needs more closely
 - helping parents to contribute to their children's learning and development in preparation for school.
- Promote and provide a wider range of adult learning courses by:
 - giving advice and guidance about options for further study
 - tracking the take up and success of adult courses
 - considering closely how well adult learning is providing parents with employability skills, including the use of computer skills
 - being clear about intended outcomes courses and duration
 - providing a wider range of work-related training programmes.
- Set up a training programme to improve staff's understanding of early learning and development, planning next steps for children, early reading and school readiness.

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 of Her Majesty's Inspectors and one Additional Inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with senior leaders and managers from the local authority, the centre leader and programme manager, the commissioned provider, partner agencies and parents. They also met with the outreach and family support team leaders, early years' workers, volunteers and members of the advisory board.

The inspectors visited the group's two sites and sessions held in community venues.

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

Inspection team

Jane Neech, Lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Jonathan Palk

Her Majesty's Inspector

David Baber

Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about the group

Devon – Locality 1 East Devon group consists of two children's centres, Axe Valley and Honiton children's centres. The group serves the coastal town of Seaton, urban areas of Honiton and Axminster and rural areas in Devon. The towns and villages cover an approximate geographical area of 152 square miles. The group is run by The Children's Society on behalf of the local authority. The Children's Society has been responsible for running the group since 2012. There are 1,827 children living in the area. The senior leadership team for the centres consists of a centre leader and a programme manager. Since the first inspection, there is one advisory board for the group.

The area is not identified as being deprived overall. However, there are pockets of deprivation among the areas that are considered to be more affluent. The number of families who are not working is increasing. Public transport facilities are sporadic and families in outlying villages are at risk of social isolation.

Most of the population is White British, with very small numbers of families from Black and minority ethnic groups. There are very few families who speak English as an additional language.

Most children in the area start early years education with skills that are broadly in line with what is typical for their age. The group meets the 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 in Seaton and Honiton, venues in Axminster and community venues within villages.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Requires improvement

- Since the inspection the number of families who know about the centre has risen. The large majority, including those expecting children and those most in need, engage with services now and access the centre. This is because the centre is better at promoting its services through strong partnership working.
- Staff have reviewed the community the centres serve to identify where there are areas of least advantage. The centre, along with partners from health and other organisations, has pinpointed specific locations to deliver activities closer to families most in need. However, these are not yet operating fully.
- A key recommendation from the previous inspection was to improve the access to services by young children and families. Since the inspection more families in Axminster are attending services. The centre has put services in place, such as antenatal classes and specific groups for families. Staff now know the families they work with in this area well and are successfully maintaining contact with them.
- Most children take up their free place at nursery from the age of three years. Most two-year-old children use their funded nursery place to attend one of the early years settings in the local area. Centre staff work individually with parents to encourage and support them to use their child's two-year-old funded place.
- More families are sustaining regular contact and involvement with the services across the centre group. The previous inspection recommended a review of the delivery of family support work so that families can access a timely response according to their needs. The new family support and outreach team leaders have quickly established good relationships with families in the community. This means that where specialist support is needed families are signposted to the appropriate service.
- A current barrier to the centres' work with families most in need is the lack of continuity in the partnership working with social service colleagues. Frequent changes in social service staff mean

that families are less likely to sustain regular contact with professionals, other than the children's centre staff. Families report, that in times of crisis, their main and regular contact is only with the centre staff who give continuous support and help.

The quality of practice and services

Requires improvement

- Leaders now check more carefully the impact of services for priority groups. The centre has a clearer understanding of how its work is making a difference where it matters.
- Families receive relevant care, guidance and support at times of crisis. Those who are in need of help, for example those suffering from domestic violence, are well supported because the group is now an established member of a multi-agency team. Early help work with families helps maintain children's safety and welfare.
- Families benefit from an adequate balance of services open to everyone and those aimed at specific groups. However, the range of quality activities that promote early learning and development is too variable. Some interesting activities are offered to families in an attempt to reduce health and educational inequalities. Summer holiday activities are appreciated by parents. Family Fun in the Park helps to address social isolation and increase enjoyment of the outdoors.
- However, activities are not planned well enough to highlight what children are going to learn and how their progress will be measured. Activities often taper off without making it clear to parents how the experiences have benefited children's early learning.
- Activities such as Bounce and Rhyme at the Axminster library introduce families and their children to opportunities for early learning, for example by rhyme making and responding to songs. The sessions, however, do not provide enough guidance to parents on how they can help their child enjoy reading and foster a love of books.
- The recording of the checks on children's progress are too variable. Observations lack a focus on the next steps in children's learning and development. Centre workers do not link observations well enough to planning further activities to help those children who need to make the most progress.
- Although the very large majority of adults complete the courses they enrol on, overall there are insufficient opportunities for adult learning. Some courses do not meet the needs of the adults attending. The systems to track the progress of adults and check the impact of these arrangements are insufficiently established. The centre cannot evidence the proportion of adults who complete courses, or what they progress to, as a result of the courses they have attended.
- Case files record the details of work done with individual families by staff in the community. These files show the work that is planned or completed. For example, the reason why contact is paused, the actions planned with the family, or the improvements made. This makes it clear how well each family is doing and how successful the centre is at reducing inequalities for individual families.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

Requires improvement

- Effective leadership and management have re-focused the children's centre team on its core purpose. Critical self-evaluation has resulted in a more precise focus on groups identified as a priority. The centres are beginning to use resources to reduce inequalities, such as prioritising services in Axminster.
- Since the previous inspection the advisory board has stepped up to the mark by using performance information to evaluate progress against the areas for improvement. A parent has recently joined the advisory board and acts as a conduit for sharing information with parents.
- Much of the drive to improve has come from the centre leader and programme manager. They have introduced staff training at team meetings on safeguarding policies and procedures. This has been welcomed by staff and contributes to promoting the welfare of young children. However, leaders and managers have yet to deliver training related to children's early learning and development.
- The centre leader has introduced rigorous procedures for supervising staff. Procedures for setting targets for staff, professional supervision and induction of new staff, are comprehensive.
- Safeguarding is embedded. Procedures for recruitment of staff, including volunteers, place a high emphasis on keeping children safe. Parents spoken to say they feel safe and enjoy the activities.

Children who are looked after, subject to child protection plans, and those deemed to be 'children in need' are well supported. As a result, the centre has been effective in helping to reduce the risk of harm for these children and their families.

- Service level agreements and protocols with key partners are generally well established. Information is received from most key partners for leaders to monitor the impact on services on reducing inequalities for children and families. Partnering with providers to provide a range of work-related programmes is underdeveloped.
- The challenge for improvement from the local authority is strong. The action plans contain precise targets to measure how well the centre is improving the lives of families, particularly those in most need.
- Leaders from The Children's Society have an overview of the centres' strategy for improvement. Centre policies are delivered by The Children's Society. Some policies, however, such as those relating to complaints procedures, are not easily accessible to parents.
- Links between the centres and the local community are now strong. There is an acknowledgement that there is a new openness between them and the will to work together and share good practice.

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.

Group details

Unique reference number	80023
Local authority	Devon County Council
Inspection number	446096
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	Vikki Raymond
Date of previous inspection	June 2013
Telephone number	01297 20542
Email address	AxeValleyCC@childrenssociety.org.uk

This group consists of the following children's centres:

- Axe valley Children's Centre (20148)
- Honiton and District Children's Centre (21548)

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