

Somerset Taunton Children's Centre Group

110 Roman Road, Taunton, TA1 2BL

Inspection dates

22–24 September 2014

Overall effectiveness

This inspection:

Inadequate

4

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.

- Not enough families, including those in most need, make use of services across the group of children's centres.
- The systems in place to measure the difference services make to families are ineffective. Leaders do not know if families are helped sufficiently or what services they might need.
- Until recently, the local authority has not monitored how well the group of centres works. It failed to identify serious weaknesses in the cluster's leadership.
- The cluster does not work closely with enough early years settings, or schools, to know what support children need in their learning and development and to meet their needs.
- Children are not well prepared for school because groups and services do not prioritise development of their basic skills of personal, communication and physical development.
- Support for some families most in need is poorly planned and documented. Some case files are of poor quality and indicate centre services are not always matched to the needs of families.
- Leaders do not ensure that every partner organisation that delivers services on a centre's behalf has a clear understanding of how to keep children and families safe.
- Not all staff implement the cluster's policy that stipulates personal cameras and mobile telephones must not be used by adults whilst in the centres.
- There are too few opportunities for adults to improve their English, mathematics and volunteering skills. This hampers their preparation for further training and/or employment.

It has the following strengths:

- Some families receive appropriate support and practical help to improve their well-being and circumstances and say that staff are 'always happy to help'.
- The local authority recently introduced a well-planned re-organisation aimed at improving the services families receive.

What does the group need to do to improve further?

- Increase the number of local families who access services so that at least a large majority regularly uses and benefits from them, especially those most in need or identified as priority groups.
- Implement effective systems to show the difference children's centre services make to those who use them.
- Improve leadership and governance so that evaluation and improvement planning are sharply focused and bring about rapid and sustained improvement in all aspects of the cluster's work.
- Improve children's learning and development, especially in their personal, social and emotional development, their communication and language development, and their physical development so children are ready for school, by:
 - making good use of information about levels of children's development and assessment of individual children's learning to plan centre provision so services make a positive difference to children's progress
 - working with local early years providers and schools to share information about the learning needs of children and make effective use of this to deliver relevant, good quality sessions.
- Ensure parents have more planned opportunities to improve their English, numeracy and volunteering skills, by:
 - providing better signposting to relevant educational providers
 - making sure that all on-site courses are precisely matched to adults' needs, especially for those adults who have English as an additional language
 - developing and implementing a structured volunteer programme that involves parents successfully.
- Ensure leaders and managers rigorously evaluate procedures intended to keep children safe, by:
 - improving the quality of case file recording so that all staff record details precisely, evaluate information routinely, and assess improvements made so case files are not closed too quickly and families receive well-planned support that meets their needs
 - reviewing existing partnership arrangements so that all partners fully understand the cluster's safeguarding protocols and mirror these in their own work with families
 - training all staff about centre policies with regard to the use of mobile telephones and personal cameras so they implement these consistently.

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 two Additional Inspectors. The inspectors held meetings with representatives of the local authority, leaders, managers and members of the advisory boards in place before the current cluster reorganisation. Inspectors also held meetings with parents, and representatives of partner organisations, as well as with staff who work directly with families. They observed a meeting of the Halcon One Team in the Acorns reach area. Inspectors visited each centre site and observed a number of centre sessions. These included a healthy child clinic, Play and Learn sessions, the Younger Parents Group and an adult self-development session. They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

During this inspection, inspectors asked additional questions designed to ascertain the cluster's view of the impact and effectiveness of local authority services to support improvement for children looked after, on free school meals and the most able pupils. This information will contribute to work being carried out by Ofsted to assess the use, quality and impact of support services.

The inspection covered the following children's centres: Acorns; Hillside; The Hollies; and Brock House.

Inspection team

Susan Mann, Lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Jane Burchall	Her Majesty's Inspector
Joyce Cox	Additional inspector
Megan Dauksta	Additional inspector

Full report

Information about the group

Somerset Taunton Children's Centre Group is a cluster of children's centres that includes Acorns, Hillside, The Hollies, and Brock House Children's Centres. There are 4,729 children aged under five years living in the catchment area. Somerset children's centres underwent a significant reorganisation in June 2014 and now operate as 'getset' (hubs) family centres. This has involved significant staff changes and many staff have started their roles in the last three months. Once the reorganisation is complete, all centres will cater for families of children aged from birth to 19 years, although not all cover this age range yet. The Somerset Taunton Children's Centre Cluster Group is directly governed by the local authority. Services offered include health, family support services, play sessions, and advice about housing, employment and benefits.

Some centres are located in areas of high deprivation, most notably Acorns Children's Centre. In one area of the Acorns area, children's centre staff are part of the Halcon One team. This is a police-led initiative that involves a number of partner organisations. Halcon One meetings occur three times each week to address local families' needs. Brock House Children's Centre serves areas within the town, as well as rural and village areas. A small minority of families who live in the cluster's catchment area live in workless households. A few families have ethnic minority heritage, many of these with Eastern European heritage. Families can access a range of childcare from local early years settings and childminders. Levels vary, but most children enter early years provision with levels below those found nationally.

The centres have identified a number of groups on which to focus services. These include workless households, lone parents, teenage parents, military families, families affected by domestic abuse, substance abuse and mental health issues, and families from ethnic minority groups.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Inadequate

- Too few families make use of centre services throughout the cluster. Leaders have failed to make best use of available information to identify the level of use by families, especially those most in need. Only a minority of all families living in the catchment area have used services, including those expecting children.
- Leaders and staff have identified priority groups of families who they believe would most benefit from their services. However, these are not fully understood across the cluster and different centres identify different priorities that are not always effectively planned for. This leads to uncertainty about how well some groups, such as military families, looked after children and those affected by mental illness and substance abuse, are participating in services.
- The local authority has a great deal of information at its fingertips about the areas served by the centres and identified needs of families. Sound partnerships with health, housing teams and other organisations provide further useful information. However, leaders have not used what is available to them to analyse the needs of families and deliver relevant

services.

- At the request of the inspection team, cluster leaders analysed existing information to show how well some identified priority groups of families use services. This showed that few lone parents and only a small minority of children living in workless households or families with ethnic minority heritage use the centres. Figures are better for teenage parents, and most of those living in the area use the centres. These figures had not been requested or provided by leaders before the inspection which indicates a fundamental lack of precision in the cluster's service evaluation and planning.
- The large majority of two-year-old children eligible for free early years education make use of their funded place to attend an early years setting. A good level of three- and four-year olds take up their funded place so that almost all attend an early years setting.
- In the Acorn's Halcon area, more families are involved with one-to-one and family support services than other parts of the cluster's area. Some of these families have regular contact with family support workers, including those who may be less likely to sustain such contact. This is as a result of the centre's involvement with the Halcon One Team initiative and this level of input is not replicated elsewhere for families using other centres in the cluster.
- Services are delivered across the cluster's area and are planned with good regard to local access and public transport routes to help families attend. However, staff do not accurately evaluate how well sessions meet families' needs and their success is sometimes by luck more than judgement as a consequence. On occasion, the times of sessions appear inconvenient, such as afternoon story time; some parents say they do not know what groups are available in their area, which indicates unsuccessful marketing of services.

The quality of practice and services

Inadequate

- The cluster does not evaluate its services well enough and so has little information to show the difference it makes to families who use them. A few individual case studies outline examples of where good quality family support has made a positive difference to families. However, these instances are far too rare and few families in need are helped to improve their circumstances.
- Many children are not ready for school when the time comes and centre services have not addressed this. Staff do not make use of available information about the children's levels of development to tailor sessions to children's needs, especially in areas of personal, social and emotional development, communication and language, and physical development.
- Staff do not assess how well children are doing and they do not evaluate the success of sessions in enough detail to know what has worked well. Sessions such as Play and Learn and the Young Parents Group are not always planned well enough to help children learn, especially those children eligible for free school meals and those at risk of falling behind their peers.
- Partnership working with early years and schools is too variable. In too many instances not enough information about the learning needs of children is shared. Consequently, centre sessions do not challenge children to reach their full potential.
- There are limited opportunities for adults to learn or to develop their work skills. Centres do not highlight what might be available locally for adults to improve their English, numeracy and language skills. Courses run at the centre do not always meet adults' needs fully, especially for those learning English as an additional language. The volunteering programme is not well supported and very few parents gain workplace experience through volunteering.

- Some families working with outreach workers are helped to improve their financial circumstances. Staff have forged good links with a range of partner organisations including housing services, debt advisers and the Citizens Advice Bureau to use when families need such support. This has led to some positive results, such as a reduction in levels of families being evicted.
- The quality of case recording is variable and some records are poorly kept. Management checks are too infrequent and lack rigour and so do not identify weak practice. Too many files do not evaluate the difference services make to improving families' lives, some of whom are in the most difficult of circumstances. The rationale for actions is not always clear; for example, some actions bear little resemblance to the identified needs. On occasion, cases have been closed before family improvements are secured. In such cases, leaders and staff do not know whether some families and their children are safe or if their lives have improved.
- Adults who have experienced domestic abuse and are known to the centres receive good support to help them cope in the short term and improve in the long term. Staff work with a number of partners, including the Halcon One Team in Acorns, and have tailor-made courses to help adults recover and move forward. Some case studies indicate these services make a positive difference for those involved.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

Inadequate

- The local authority has not acted quickly enough to improve the work of the cluster. Tools designed to ensure centres performed well, such as the annual conversation and improvement planning, have been weak and ineffective. Poor analysis of available figures and information meant the local authority was unaware of low levels of engagement. As a result, families, especially those most in need, are not served well enough by their local children's centres.
- As part of the cluster reorganisation, the local authority has begun to implement some improvements in how services are managed and run. The recently appointed 'getset' operations manager has already put appropriate initiatives in place to prioritise the needs of children. However, such steps are too new to have made any significant difference to improving services for families in need.
- Leaders are not fully aware of the child protection procedures of every partner organisation that works with families on the cluster's behalf. Basic recruitment checks are done, but the centres do not satisfy themselves that partners fully understand the importance of keeping children and vulnerable adults safe or their circumstances wholly confidential. Partners are not given enough explanation of the importance of these issues by staff or leaders and this puts children and vulnerable adults at risk.
- Not all staff implement the cluster's policy on the use of privately-owned camera phones. Most parents know the policy, but some were observed to photograph children in sessions without challenge from attending staff. These images could be shared beyond the parent's and centre's control and thus present a risk to children.
- The newly-formed advisory board is well on the way in its process of reconstruction to match the reorganised cluster of centres. Members of the previous boards monitored centre improvement and the needs of local families through regular meetings. However, this scrutiny failed to identify that too few families in need used the services. Parents have some opportunities to influence the way centres operate through contributing to surveys and the advisory board.

- There is insufficient monitoring of how effective work is in improving families' lives, and evaluation is not precise enough to drive improvement. Managers support staff through regular meetings and informal contact. However, these systems have not identified where some families are not being helped enough.
- Too many case files of children subject to a child protection plan are of poor quality. This hampers the ability of leaders and staff to evaluate the progress that all children are making. The recently re-introduced use of the Common Assessment Framework is not yet established in practice and so does not ensure all concerns are identified early enough. Similarly, links with a newly allocated social worker are in the early stages of partnership development and are not yet making enough difference.
- The services of the cluster have not yet recovered from the reorganisation. Managers are still establishing their roles in the new structure. Some staff posts are still to be filled, and there are many newly introduced systems that are in their infancy. Centre staff resources are not well managed and, too often, there is an unnecessary waiting list of families in need awaiting family support. Gaps in the delivery of outreach and planning of services for local families throughout the cluster mean that those most in need of support do not receive a level of service that they should. Consequently, there is insufficient improvement in the lives of families most in need of support.

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	80822
Local authority	Somerset
Inspection number	451013
Managed by	The local authority
Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	4729
Centre leader	Penny Bragg
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Telephone number	01823 322508
Email address	PBragg@somerset.gov.uk

This group consists of the following children's centres:

- 20039 Acorns Children's Centre
- 21507 Hillside Children's Centre
- 21525 The Hollies Children's Centre
- 20454 Brock House Children's Centre

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