

Inspection report for Victoria Park Children's Centre

Local authority	Somerset County Council
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Linked school if applicable	
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Victoria Nursery (EY336760)

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.

An inspection of the registered early years/childcare provision was carried out at the same time as the inspection of the centre under section 49 of the Childcare Act 2006. The report of this inspection is available on our website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the centre manager and senior leadership team, the local authority, partners from health and social services, the family support workers and other front line staff, parents and carers.

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

Information about the centre

Victoria Park Children's Centre is a phase one children's centre and is one of three centres within a cluster being managed by the centre manager. The other two centres are Hamp and Nether Stowey whose reach areas adjoin Victoria Park's. The centre was designated in 2005 and provides the full core offer. There are 900 children under five years of age in the reach area which is within the 20% most deprived wards in the country and the top 10% of deprived wards on the Child Poverty Index. The majority of families are of White British background, with 1.8% of families from minority ethnic backgrounds. There are a number of languages other than English spoken within the reach area including Polish, Portuguese and Lithuanian.

Claimants for income support and disability benefits are above national averages, with the centre in the top 25% of the country's most deprived wards for employment. At 24.8% the centre has a higher than average number of families living in social housing, with 9.2% of households being lone parents. Children's levels on entry to the Early Years Foundation Stage are well below those expected for their age.

The centre is located in a small complex that also houses a community centre, medical centre and pharmacy. The majority of the centre building is dedicated to the registered childcare provision. The nursery is registered for 45 children from birth to five years of age. Apart from the nursery, the centre has two rooms suitable for small numbers but most centre activities take place in the community centre next door. There is also a room, with kitchen area, based at Westover Primary School for children's centre use. There are two family support workers based in the children's centre building. The centre is governed by the local authority. The advisory board is currently on hold until a children's centre cluster advisory board is established.

Inspection judgements

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

Overall effectiveness

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

3

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

2

Main findings

This satisfactory centre is improving rapidly due to the effective and determined centre manager and her newly-formed senior leadership team. The local authority restructuring has resulted in some changes to centre leadership with the current manager and most of her team starting in April this year. Partners and parents alike report that they have noticed the changes since April, seeing a more professional and focused approach to meeting users' needs. In a short amount of time clear systems and procedures have been put into place to effectively support staff to develop their professional expertise. The centre is quick to react to identified weaknesses and put things right. The safeguarding weaknesses, identified at the inspection of the registered provision, had all been resolved by the end of the children's centre inspection with support from centre staff for the nursery manager, ensuring children are now effectively safeguarded. The centre's own safeguarding arrangements are now effective and robust. All staff and partner suitability checks and confirmations are kept in a single central record. Risk assessments are rigorous and identify any actions needed to ensure safety whether attending activities in the centre building, the community centre on outings or using outdoor play areas.

The outdoor area has improved since the last inspection and the children's centre teacher is working with childcare staff to further improve the use of the outdoors to contribute to children's all round development. The centre manager developed a clear transition plan that identified the main issues following her move to the centre

in April. Issues identified have clear actions for improvement and dates for completion. Many of the targets have already been achieved. Apart from ensuring actions from the last inspection were completed, staff have established a clear system of case recording and have a strongly developing partnership with the community centre. This means the centre now has a firm foundation on which to build and move forward. The manager rightly prioritised actions from the last inspection and has also taken time to stand back and review centre services and partnerships. The centre is now consulting with users and members in the community to ensure the centre is delivering the activities that they want and need. An advisory board was set up following the last inspection but its role was not clearly understood, and members were not able to challenge the centre about their performance. The last advisory board meeting was postponed until the manager and the local authority have had an opportunity to explore the best way forward for this centre and the other two centres in the cluster. This includes looking at the possible benefits of having one advisory board for the three centres in the cluster, with parent representation from each centre. As partner agencies work across all three centres this would prevent duplication of meetings with the intention of ensuring greater professional involvement and challenge.

The number of users registered with the centre has almost doubled in the last two months, but is still very low at 270 families. The centre receives no information from health services about live births or those with children under five in the reach area. As a result the centre cannot be sure that they are meeting the needs of the area or delivering services and activities users want and need. The local authority provides some helpful data on numbers of ethnic minorities and languages in the reach area, but it is not clear where these families live or what services they would benefit from. A half-time lead centre officer has recently been appointed to take forward outreach and community development work. The centre rightly recognises that the speed of progress in this area will be dependent on gaining agreement for an early start date for the lead centre officer, plus continued development of the partnerships being established with the local community. In the meantime, the centre is producing leaflets and information in languages other than English and there is access to a translation service if needed.

Safeguarding, equality and diversity and the outdoor play area were all areas for action following the last inspection. There is no evidence of the local authority developing an action plan or monitoring the centre's progress with the actions raised. The former centre manager developed a simple action plan and took steps to resolve some of the issues, such as ensuring staff received training on safeguarding and the Common Assessment Framework. However, the majority of actions have taken place since April this year. Some changes have been made to the building to create more space for small groups, and the family support workers have been moved out of the community centre into the children's centre. This makes the family support workers more visible to users and also helps them get to know centre users on an informal basis. The centre manager's commitment to improving outcomes has, in turn, motivated staff and a strong staff team is developing. The concerted and effective action of the senior leadership team to overcome weaknesses has already led to

improved performance. Feedback from partners and parents is showing that analysis of needs is now being used effectively to target support for those who are vulnerable or hard to reach. As a result, the centre's capacity for improvement is good.

A clear referral system has been established with 'request for involvement' forms used by professionals and providers in the area where family support is needed. A cycle of performance management is being established so that all staff and partners gain a greater understanding of the role and purpose of the children's centre and how they can contribute to its success. Outcomes in the district are satisfactory and improving. However, the centre currently has limited evidence to show its specific impact to improving outcomes for users. Evaluations of activities and services are undertaken and parents talk to centre staff and family support workers about how centre services are helping to support them and their families. However, there are few case studies to show improvements over time and data are not collected specifically for the reach area, making it difficult for the centre to clearly identify the contribution it is making to improving outcomes, such as those identified by national indicators.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Strengthen arrangements to enable users and partners to challenge the centre by:
 - developing and implementing plans for a more effective advisory board structure with parent representation from each of the children's centres
 - including parents and carers and other users of services in the governance of the centre to promote more effective decision making and to give the community a greater voice in decisions.
- Strengthen evaluation by ensuring that the centre:
 - uses evidence from feedback to clearly show the impact of its services on outcomes
 - uses other data and information to evaluate and target its work and to plan for the future
 - produces development plans with clear outcomes and measurable targets.
- The local authority should work with health services to develop and implement a protocol for sharing information about live births and children under five new to the area, so that the centre can:
 - improve participation rates as they will know who is in the reach area and can establish contact with families with children under five years of age
 - ensure the range of services are better targeted at areas of need and staff expertise is deployed appropriately
 - monitor the participation of families, including those from minority ethnic groups, to ensure the range of users reflects the community it serves.

- Improve participation rates by:
 - ensuring outreach and community development work is prioritised
 - develop partnerships with the community centre and medical centre to enable better identification of community needs

How good are outcomes for users?

3

Indicators from the limited data available and feedback from the centre's partners and families suggest that outcomes for children and families are improving, albeit slowly. Obesity in young children remains an issue and is one of the priorities for the centre. It is putting on taster sessions, such as 'feed your family for £5', that provide advice on nutritious meals on a budget. Taster sessions have been developed to identify whether this is the sort of support families would benefit from. Immunisation rates are improving and, although lower than average, breast feeding rates are improving. The centre works well with health visitors based in the medical centre to identify the needs of the area, but realises there is more that needs to be done to develop services for pregnant women. The breast feeding group has recently moved from the community centre into the new room created in the children's centre. Parents like this move, with one parent commenting, 'It is much cosier and like a home from home.' Taster sessions on baby massage and first aid have been very well received.

Children show safe behaviour and a satisfactory understanding of how to keep themselves safe. Work with social services is improving and appropriately supports children assessed as in need or on child protection plans. Multi-agency meetings and the team around the child approach are ensuring those who need support the most receive it. The partnership with Barnados is reaching those who find it difficult to engage with the centre, with clear, focused and time-limited plans to gradually build parents' confidence and enable parents to access universal services at the centre. Parents are gaining an awareness of how to prevent accidents, home fire safety and crime prevention in the home through sessions provided by the local fire safety officer and police community support officer. Users report feeling safe at the centre and share concerns with staff.

Local schools indicate that the children from the centre's nursery have a good transition to Reception Year. However, children continue to arrive with low levels of skills, particularly in language development and social and emotional development. The guidance from the centre teacher is ensuring the centre's activities support improving children's readiness for school and identifying problems early. Children with special educational needs and/or disabilities have clear individual education plans targeted to their specific needs. The centre teacher also works to support private and voluntary childcare providers in the centre reach area as the number of places in the centre's childcare provision are limited. Local headteachers express their delight at being approached by the children's centre to develop partnership working and improve the educational outcomes for children.

Parents say they enjoy coming to the centre because they learn about how to

support their children's learning and development at home. 'Stay and play' sessions provide them with interesting ideas to try with their children at home. Outcomes for adult learners are improving. Courses are advertised on the centre notice board and targeted interventions, such as 'Triple P Parenting' and the 'Strengthening Families' courses, help parents to improve their own and their families' well-being.

The centre is only just beginning to establish itself in the community. Many users of centre activities do not realise they are run by the children's centre as they are based in the community centre. The centre has clear plans to improve this aspect through targeted outreach and community development. Lack of data about the identity and location of families with young children is hampering progress. Users communicate their views through evaluations and face-to-face contact with family support workers. Users say they feel their views are listened to and they can influence the groups that are run. However, there is no parent forum and no parent voice on the advisory board. The centre acknowledges this as an area for improvement and has plans in place to create a cluster advisory board with parent representation. A parents' comment book has been put out in the centre since April and all comments recorded are positive about the changes they are seeing.

A few users have been involved in adult training, with seven centre users gaining employment in the last year following on from advice, training and support provided by the Shaw Trust. Lone parents are signposted to the adviser at Jobcentre Plus. The notice board in the centre advertises local jobs and courses offered by Somerset Learning and Skills and Bridgwater College, helping parents to identify the kind of work and training available locally. The centre is currently in discussions to set up a job club in the community centre to help with filling in forms and writing curriculum vitae, as well as general advice. There are also plans to run the 'Make Your Experience Count' course in September following its success in other centres.

These are the grades for the outcomes for users

The extent to which children, including those from vulnerable groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles	3
The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	3
The extent to which all users enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	3
The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships and users contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	3
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	3

How good is the provision?

2

The assessment of need is increasingly effective. The Common Assessment Framework and pre-Common Assessment Framework are used to ensure provision is coordinated where there is multi-agency involvement. The work of the family support team and Barnados outreach support are targeted at those who are most vulnerable and hard to engage. Clear plans are in place for most users who are in need of support, including exit strategies for moving families on to universal services. In a small minority of cases families are referred to statutory services to ensure children are protected and appropriate support is in place. The strong partnerships being established further support this work along with the multi-agency meetings to discuss complex cases.

Children's learning and development are supported well by the work of the centre teacher and children are making satisfactory progress in their learning within the childcare provision. Children with special educational needs and/or disabilities have individual education plans with clear targets and identification of needs.

When the centre manager came to the centre in April she was in the difficult position of families believing that centre services and activities had stopped. Reductions in some centrally-provided services have also had an impact on services provided in the area, such as the cancelling of the young parents group. On further investigation it became apparent that the same services and activities had been running for a number of years without real evaluation as to their impact or need. As a result, the centre manager has set up a number of taster sessions over the summer period to enable the centre to put in place a programme that really meets users' needs from September. The centre is aware there is still a lot of work to be done to ensure participation rates increase and services are better targeted at needs, but have made a good start to ensuring equality of access and effective programming.

The quality of care, guidance and support is effectively tailored to support users to develop their well-being and that of their families. Users feel well supported by the centre at times of crisis through the effective family support provided by the centre and through Barnados. The family support, alongside courses such as 'Strengthening Families', is improving outcomes for individual users and their children. There are information leaflets for parents to access on a variety of topics including childcare provision. The centre has had some of these translated into community languages to support parents with English as a second or other language.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users	2
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all users	3
The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of users and the wider community	3
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to users within the centre and the wider community	2

How effective are the leadership and management?

2

All safeguarding actions arising from the last inspection have been completed. There is a clear child protection plan that identifies who to go to if there are any concerns and what to do if allegations are made against staff. Staff have all attended appropriate child protection training and are working effectively with statutory services to ensure robust arrangements are in place to share information about vulnerable children and families with multi-agency involvement.

The governance and accountability arrangements that have been put in place since April are clear. There are effective professional supervision and management arrangements in place that ensure information is shared and staff know what is expected of them in their roles. The administration team has been quick to put in place systems to monitor effectively the work of the centre and this has resulted in a clearer understanding of some of the remaining issues that need to be resolved, one of which is the cost to the centre of the nursery provision.

The centre manager has been effective in reducing spend on community centre facilities by making some internal changes to the children's centre. This has resulted in an office in the nursery for the childcare manager and an additional small room in the centre. The family support team has also moved into the main centre office, saving money spent on office facilities in the community centre. In addition, the centre has also identified a room in Westover Primary School that is for centre use, but had not been used by the centre for over five years. The centre manager has started to make good use of this room for families that live in both Victoria Park and Hamp Children's Centres reach areas for sessions such as infant massage. The next 'Strengthening Families' course will run from this room, thereby significantly reducing room rental costs for centre activities. The cost and sustainability of the nursery provision, which has far exceeded its budget, have been identified as a strain on already diminishing resources. Work is being carried out between the centre and local authority to identify where savings can be made and how the nursery provision can become self-financing in the longer term.

The centre manager has a clear performance management cycle that identifies what needs to be done each month. Since April the centre staff have been involved in reviewing the centre's self-evaluation. Information from self-evaluation and

meetings, along with consultation with partners and users, informs the business planning for the centre. The centre manager knows what is needed but has rightly prioritised actions to address the issues raised at the last inspection, before moving forward with the business planning process. However, plans are progressing and there is evidence that evaluation has led to changes to provision. Links between strategic plans and services have already substantially improved. Although the centre does not yet have robust evidence to show outcomes are rapidly improving, the accurate diagnosis and analysis of the centre's areas for improvement in the transition plan show that the already rigorous monitoring is having an impact. Leaders clearly communicate their high expectations of staff and for the centre's users and the wider community. Staff are motivated and most are galvanised into channelling their efforts to an ever-increasing effect.

Partnerships are increasingly effective. Relationships between the centre and partners, such as health, are clear and effectively managed. Health visitors comment that the support provided by family support workers during the child health clinics has been of great benefit to both them and the families who attend. Partnerships with social services are ensuring those who are vulnerable or hard to engage are being well supported through multi-agency working and the team around the child approach. The developing partnerships with the medical centre and community centre managers are enhancing opportunities for the centre to meet the wider range of needs in the community and gaining greater community involvement. For example, the centre is exploring using the culinary expertise in the community centre café to provide meals for the children in the nursery.

Users express satisfaction with centre services and activities. They feel welcomed and listened to. They evaluate services and activities following attendance, but do not yet have any formal channels to express their views and shape services. The only negative expressed by parents related to the 'Stay and Play' sessions. They enjoy attending the sessions and there are always plenty of parents attending, but they say that they would rather that 'Stay and Play' was held in the same room each week as they often do not know where in the community centre the session is being run. If the child health clinic overruns, the 'Stay and Play' session is moved to the smaller room which, although parents prefer this because there is a carpeted floor for the non-mobile children, can become quite crowded especially when the children's buggies are also kept in the room. The centre manager is working to resolve any issues for parents by working with the community centre to ensure that children's centre activities that take place in the community centre meet the needs of users.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day-to-day management arrangements are clear and understood	2
The extent to which ambitious targets drive improvement, provision is integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community	2

The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of users and the wider community	3
The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties	3
The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults	2
The extent to which evaluation is used to shape and improve services and activities	3
The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services the centre has been commissioned to provide	2
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	3

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

The findings from the inspection of the children's centre nursery were used to inform the judgements made during this inspection.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Victoria Park Children's Centre on 15 and 16 June 2011. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

Thank you for making us so welcome when we inspected your children's centre. During our visit we looked at the centre's plans and documents and talked with a number of you as well as the professionals that work with you. Many of you told us how much you enjoy the activities provided by the centre. You also told us how much you like the new room in the centre that will be used for some of the smaller groups, such as the breastfeeding group. You told us that the staff are friendly, good listeners and give you good support, especially at times of difficulty or crisis in your lives. The activities run by the centre are well attended. However, it is not always clear that the activities you attend are run by the children's centre and you would also like to have a specific room for 'Stay and Play' so that you will always know where to go and do not have to check with the centre first. The centre manager is

working with the community centre to ensure that children's centre activities that take place in the community centre can better meet your needs.

The centre does some things well, and the new senior leadership team has plans to gain greater involvement of parents in decision making and challenge to the centre, but these are still in the early stages. We have asked the centre to continue to work with partners and parents to establish an advisory board with parent representation from each of the three centres in the cluster. However, the speed of progress will partly depend on how soon the newly-appointed lead centre officer can start working at the centre. The centre is now reaching more people in the area, but numbers are still far too low. We have asked the centre to do more to establish the centre in the community so that it can be sure that the range of services and activities it develops meets your needs. The centre has put on some taster sessions, with more happening over the summer, so that you can let them know whether the activities are what you want and need.

All the professionals from the different agencies work well together to make sure you receive good advice and support. However, the centre does not receive any information from health services about who lives in the reach area, so we have asked the local authority and health services to agree a protocol for sharing information about who the families in the reach area are. This will help the centre to better understand the reach area and enable it to contact families to let them know what the centre can offer.

The centre is starting to gather evidence to show it is improving outcomes for children and families. The manager drafted and implemented a clear transition plan that set out the priorities for the first few months when she came to the centre. Most of these are now completed and the centre is due to start work on a plan for the coming year. We have asked the staff to develop plans with clear outcomes, and use data and information from your evaluations to clearly show the impact of their work in the future.

At the last inspection the centre was set some actions that they needed to complete to make sure the centre improved. Some work was done on these actions before April, but the majority have been completed since the new manager and her senior leadership team started working at the centre. The leadership team in the centre is committed to making things better for you and has already laid the firm foundations from which the centre can now move forward.

Thank you very much for your welcome and willingness to speak to inspectors. We thoroughly enjoyed talking with you and sampling the centre's work. We wish you every success in the future.

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