

Inspection report for Victoria children's centre

Local authority	Somerset
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Centre governance	Consultation forum
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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 two of Her Majesty's Inspectors and one additional inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with representatives of the centre's forum, the local authority, partnership agencies, members of staff and users of the centre

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

Information about the centre

Victoria children's centre serves an area with high levels of deprivation. A higher than average proportion of adults in the area served by the centre is on income support and this includes those claiming disability benefits. A greater proportion of people in the local area have no qualifications than in other areas of the South West of England. The proportion of young parents within the centre's reach is well above those of the majority of other children's centre in the county.

The centre's childcare setting for children aged 4 months – 4 years old is open 49 weeks of the year, Monday to Friday, 8 am to 6 pm. The centre has previously had only one day a week support from an Early Years teacher since September 2009. The centre has recently been able to fill this vacancy with the appointment of an Early Years teacher who took up the full time post three weeks ago.

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

4

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

3

Main findings

The overall effectiveness of Victoria children's centre is inadequate because the arrangements for safeguarding are not sufficiently robust. Staff within the early years childcare setting maintain appropriate records of their concerns and these are monitored by senior leaders to ensure that they are complete. However, the centre has been slow to provide suitable training for all staff in the use of a common assessment framework (CAF). Consequently, staff practice is inconsistent and some fail to follow appropriate procedures. As a result, vulnerable individuals within the centre's local area lack sufficient protection. Despite concerted efforts, the centre has not received written confirmation that checks on the suitability of staff from a number of other professional agencies are complete.

Victoria children's centre pays careful attention to promoting an inclusive environment. The centre supplies support for a wide range of users. In particular, it provides strong guidance and support for young parents to develop their personal skills, obtain qualifications and gain employment. Children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are identified early and provided with relevant support because staff have been trained in early identification. Effective multi-agency working ensures children are helped to settle in quickly and their needs are provided for so that they make satisfactory or better academic and personal progress. For example, children's centre staff meet regularly on an inter-agency panel which consists of a large range of professionals with specialist skills in supporting children with special educational needs.

The centre contributes to developing and implementing partnership activities with a range of other outside agencies. These have a positive impact on improving outcomes for children and their families. Effective joint working between the health visitors and centre staff has resulted in improved life chances for children and their parents. For example, previously hard to reach families are now settled into the area and engaging with services. Users who have an addiction are supported to access rehabilitation.

The centre is able to signpost users on to a range of suitable adult training courses provided by local college staff. These include appropriate courses for adults who speak English as an additional language. Courses are run within the attractive shared campus site where centre staff make good use of the community centre facilities which include a spacious and well equipped hall, activity rooms and a café. A medical centre and pharmacy within the campus ensure that users are able to access easily a good range of services in the heart of the community.

Children within the centre's early years setting make satisfactory progress overall. They are able to access a suitable range of activities and particularly enjoy the opportunities to access the outdoor area. This helps children to make good progress in their physical development of gross motor skills and in their social development, sharing and taking turns with a range of equipment. The recently appointed Early Years teacher has quickly identified areas of weakness. She is monitoring planning and provision so that these aspects are more closely tailored to children's individual needs. Children's fine motor skills are less well developed because there are fewer opportunities for children to handle tools, small implements and writing equipment especially in the outdoor area.

The centre has experienced a period of staff shortage over the previous year due in part to a local authority freeze on making new appointments. This has been recently resolved and the centre has been able to appoint an Early Years teacher and additional part-time staff to work with families. Senior leaders have a clear understanding of the majority of the strengths and weaknesses of the centre's work and have produced plans which are aimed accurately at addressing the key areas. A stable senior leadership team has begun to gather and use data and evaluations to ensure that services and activities meet the needs of individual users. These actions demonstrate that leaders have a satisfactory capacity to bring about further improvement. Evaluations from a number of activities show that users report improvement in their personal development and that parents and carers make progress in developing parenting skills and feel more confident in their relationships with their child.

A lack of timely support from the local authority has led to delays in holding the centre's annual conversation, financial planning and in setting up an advisory board to assist in the management and governance of the centre. The centre has yet to develop clear governance and accountability procedures which share monitoring and evaluate the effectiveness of the centre's work. A consultation forum group has met on three occasions to discuss aspects of the centre's work. This group is not fully representative of the partnership agencies and has limited influence to ensure that services are effective. Very few parents or carers attend the group and as a result users' contribution to the evaluation and development of services and activities is limited.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Improve the centre's safeguarding procedures by ensuring;
 - all concerns for children's welfare are followed up appropriately and shared with other agencies
 - staff are trained in the use of the common assessment framework and apply these procedures consistently
 - the centre has received written confirmation that checks on staff from all other agencies are complete and recorded.
- With local authority support, improve the centre's governance and accountability arrangements to ensure that users and all key partners monitor the effectiveness of the centre's work, and are engaged in supporting and developing, integrated provision.
- Improve the early years' outdoor provision to fully promote all areas of learning and particularly opportunities to develop children's fine motor skills.

How good are outcomes for users?

4

Users show appreciation and respect for the community centre and children's centre because they provide useful services to the community. Young parents are well supported by the centre and other agencies to develop their skills and obtain national vocational qualifications. In the last year a number of these young parents have gone on to gain employment. The centre helps to increase the financial security and employment prospects of a number of users through the regular access to specialist financial information and careers advice and guidance. Links with adult education providers help a wide range of users to develop their literacy and numeracy skills and gain qualifications.

Parents show a satisfactory understanding of how to keep themselves and their children healthy. They appreciate the ability to purchase a range of organic fruit and vegetables at reasonable cost and recognise the benefits of attending groups which promote physical activity. Children in the early years' provision learn about healthy lifestyles as they eat healthy food at snack and meal times, drink water and participate in plenty of physical exercise. They make good progress in the development of their gross motor skills because this aspect of learning is well resourced in the extensive outdoor area. Children's progress in improving their early reading, writing and mathematical skills is satisfactory overall. The Early Years teacher has plans in place to develop the use of ongoing assessments so that activities more closely match the needs and abilities of each child. Those children with special educational needs are able to express their views because they receive strong support in improving their speech and language skills and their progress is monitored closely by a range of professionals.

Staff are friendly and approachable and parents and carers are made to feel welcome. Users' emotional well-being is supported through activities such as the 'Enabling Project' where users can talk in confidence about any difficulties they may be experiencing. The Primary Care Trust has recently employed Health Trainers to work with adults on a variety of health outcomes; smoking cessation, weight reduction, confidence building and healthy eating. This ensures that users make satisfactory progress in developing their personal well being.

Children and their families facing challenging circumstances within the early years setting are helped to improve their emotional well-being and their safety. This support has changed the personal circumstances of individual users who have been able to return to work. Users receive helpful advice and guidance on crime prevention and fire safety and the centre provides safety equipment to a number of users. The centre has actively sought to extend this advice and guidance by including fire safety awareness sessions into fun days and events. However, the arrangements to ensure children's safety are inadequate because staff are not sufficiently rigorous in their monitoring and reporting of welfare concerns.

High levels of enjoyment are evident in early years' provision in both the baby room

and main room due to the interesting activities on offer. Many users report that their engagement with the centre is enjoyable and this is confirmed by the many positive comments and evaluations of a range of activities. The centre has recently begun gathering information of the numbers of users that attend each activity and this shows that many activities are popular and well attended. In particular, users appreciate the opportunity to participate in healthy exercise sessions alongside their children where there is a clear emphasis on fun as well as fitness.

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	4
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	3

How good is the provision?

3

Several of the activities provided by the centre and partnership agencies are well attended and accessed by a wide range of users. Good use is made of the community centre campus to offer a more extended range of services for adults which include access to health services. Effective joint working between outreach workers, health visitors and the centre's family support workers has resulted in children and their parents improving their lifestyles. Regular contact with health visitors encourages adults to continue breastfeeding and they develop their own supportive networks with other users. Activities to encourage families to exercise with their children are organised so that they coincide with weekly health clinics and this encourages good levels of participation. The centre is developing the role of health trainers to provide additional support to adults on smoking cessation and healthy eating.

Personal development and achievement are suitably celebrated. As parents and carers complete a series of activities, they are awarded certificates to acknowledge their achievements. Users have regular access to adult training and accredited courses leading to qualifications which are provided by local college tutors. These weekly courses are located on campus ensuring that low income families without transport can access courses. The centre's partnership arrangements with a local college help adults to develop their literacy and numeracy skills.

The centre has a process in place to evaluate the services provided by staff. Where

evaluations are used well, they focus on the impact that the service has had on users and provide clear feedback on how the service could be improved. This has led to modifications in the centre's provision. For example, amendments to the timings of childcare sessions have led to an increased take up by families. The centre has used questionnaires to seek the views of fathers and male carers with the intention of engaging a greater proportion of these users. However, this process is not consistent across all activities and from all partnerships agencies and opportunities are missed to use evaluations to develop and shape activities to meet individual needs.

Well-targeted support for children and families with learning difficulties and/or disabilities has made a discernible difference for some users. For example, coordinated support for a child with special educational needs has helped a parent to gain employment. The centre's Early Years Support Officers have worked with childminders across the area to develop a consistent approach to identifying and supporting children with special educational needs.

Outreach workers liaise with the centre to engage families facing challenging circumstances. Together they are developing a more formal referral procedure with centre staff which ensures timely and appropriate response for families facing crisis. The centre's recent appointment of two additional family support staff members has increased the opportunities to visit families in their homes and provide individual support to access courses and activities.

The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users	3
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	3

How effective are the leadership and management?

4

A united and stable senior leadership team has worked tirelessly to surmount a difficult period of staff shortage. A number of recent new appointments provide opportunities for senior leaders to look beyond day-to-day staffing concerns and address key priorities. Self-evaluation of the centre's strengths and weaknesses is systematic and is supported by some evidence of impact in the shape of course evaluations. Improvements in the gathering of data and information have helped senior leaders to identify their key target groups and the extent to which they are accessing services. Senior leaders are motivated to seek further improvement and have effectively focused the centre on improving outcomes for users. They have produced clear plans to improve provision and address weaknesses.

The arrangements to safeguard children are inadequate because there are a number of omissions in the sharing of concerns. Staff do not consistently adopt appropriate procedures because they have not received sufficient training in the use of a CAF. The centre has completed a range of checks to ensure the suitability of staff, volunteers and agency staff in the early years setting. A number of professional agencies have failed to provide the necessary written assurances that the required checks on the suitability of staff have been completed.

The centre has promoted inclusion by taking effective action to include vulnerable users in their reach. For example, the outreach service has worked alongside centre staff to engage groups of users. The centre's information and policies have been translated into a range of languages known to be used in the locality and the centre has set up a group for fathers. The centre has provided strong support for children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities so that they make good personal and social development.

The centre provides satisfactory value for money because they have developed partnerships with a range of key agencies to ensure that they provide a suitable range of activities and services. These help users to make satisfactory progress overall in improving their lives and in providing increasingly effective support for their children.

The centre's governance and accountability arrangements are inadequate because roles and responsibilities are unclear. Currently there is limited evaluation and monitoring to ensure that services are effective and efficient. The current consultative forum does not include an appropriate range of agencies or users to effectively evaluate the work of the centre.

The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day to day management arrangements are clear and understood	4
The extent to which ambitious targets drive improvement, provision is integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community	3
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	4
The extent to which evaluation is used to shape and improve services	3

and activities	
The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services the centre has been commissioned to provide	3
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

None

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Victoria children's centre on 23 and 24 June 2010. Despite several positive features we judged the centre as inadequate overall. There were two main reasons for this. Firstly, the centre's arrangements to ensure children's welfare are not clearly understood and used by all staff. We found that not all staff had completed training in the use of a common recording form and that is a reason why some staff do not understand the steps that they need to take. We also found that despite considerable effort, the centre does not hold letters from some of the groups of professionals to confirm that they are suitable to work at the centre.

Secondly, we found that the centre does not have a governing or advisory body which includes enough members of staff from other agencies, representatives from the local authority and parents and carers who use the centre. This means that the centre is not able to share out responsibilities and check that everything is working as it should be.

Children who attend the early years rooms obviously enjoy their time at the centre. They are well looked after and staff provide them with interesting activities and take care to ensure that they can play and learn happily. They take good care to make sure that children who have special educational needs are helped to learn and make progress. They meet regularly with other professionals who know a lot about helping children to speak and listen and can provide extra help and advice where it is

needed. We noticed that children enjoy running and playing in the outdoor area but that sometimes they did not have enough equipment and activities to help them develop small hand movements which will help them to write letters and numbers.

The centre is able to provide you with a wide range of activities that help you and your children to develop. They are also able to help you to visit the community centre to take part in a wider range of activities. We found that the local college provides a broad range of courses including English and mathematics which are helping you to gain qualifications. These courses help you to feel more positive about yourselves and also help some of you to find work.

We found that the centre welcomes in a wide range of adults from the area. It manages to make all of you feel part of the centre and is trying hard to work with groups who do not normally take part. Health visitors and family support workers from the centre work closely together to help to encourage you to breastfeed your children and to attend the baby clinic. We noticed how popular the fun and fitness session was and that you appreciated the chance to attend the baby clinic and also take part in some exercise with your child.

We feel that the centre has provided good support to young parents and that this has helped many to learn, develop and gain qualifications. Some of you have visited the worker who is able to help you apply for jobs and to sort out your family finances. We noticed that the centre asks you for your thoughts about certain courses but we feel that more could be done to use this information to change activities to suit your needs.

We would like to thank those of you who spared the time to speak with us and were willing to share your thoughts about the centre.

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