

# Inspection report for The House Children's Centre

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<b>Local authority</b>	Somerset
<b>Inspection number</b>	384085
<b>Inspection dates</b>	18–19 January 2012
<b>Reporting inspector</b>	Jane Neech HMI

<b>Centre leader</b>	Angela Baxter
<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	Not previously inspected
<b>Centre address</b>	Waterbo Road Shepton Mallet BA4 5HE
<b>Telephone number</b>	01749 342322
<b>Fax number</b>	01749 346060 (school fax)
<b>Email address</b>	abaxter@educ.somerset.gov.uk

<b>Linked school if applicable</b>	Shepton Mallet Infant School and Nursery School
<b>Linked early years and childcare, if applicable</b>	The Link Children's Centre Coleford

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.

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

The inspectors held meetings with senior leaders, representatives from the local authority, health professionals, partners who offer services and parents. Inspectors observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

## Information about the centre

Shepton Mallet Children's Centre shares the same site as Shepton Mallet Infant and Nursery School. The centre has recently changed its name to The House Children's Centre. The signing-in reception and information area for The House Children's Centre is situated in the nursery building entrance of Shepton Mallet Infant School. The children's centre is housed in a separate building. The centre opened in 2008 as a phase two centre and is governed by a partnership board on behalf of the local authority. The House Children's Centre is open from 8.00am to 6.00pm for 48 weeks of the year and provides the full core offer of children's and families' services. Services delivered directly by the centre at the main centre site include family learning, breastfeeding peer support, childminder drop-ins, and one-to-one support for parents. Jump and Jiggle sessions are provided in the infant school hall and some family learning courses in the infant school nursery.

The centre delivers from two other locations in Shepton Mallet. Baby clinics are held nearby at the Peter Street Rooms. Services, such as health and social care sessions, are provided at the local Hillmead Community Centre. These include return to work advice and training through partnership arrangements with Somerset Learning and Skills. Since January 2012 the centre has been led by a part-time lead centre manager. Staff includes one full-time family support worker, two part-time family support workers, one of which is on a fixed-term contract until March 2012, and a part-time administrator and receptionist. Session workers lead groups as required.

There are currently 783 families with children under five years of age within the centre’s reach area. The centre serves a location where families come from a range of locations in the town of Shepton Mallet and surrounding villages. There are significant pockets of deprivation and high need, one area being in the lowest percentages of the most deprived areas of the country. The reach area includes rural communities where facilities are few and also areas where more affluent families live. The levels of skills shown by children on entry to the Early Years Foundation Stage are generally those expected for their age. However, a number of children have low skills in communication, language and literacy. There has been an increase in the number of families in the reach area whose first language is not English, particularly White Eastern European families. Approximately half of the families in the reach area are lone parents. Data show there are no teenage mothers currently. Families out of work and those dependent on workless benefits or receiving the childcare element of Working Tax Credit amount to less than one fifth of all families in the reach area. This figure is slightly lower than figures for the local authority. The majority of families are White British. The total number of families from ethnic minority groups or whose first language is not English is higher than figures for the whole of Somerset.

## 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 families**

**3**

### Capacity for sustained improvement

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

**3**

## Main findings

The House Children’s Centre has undergone a period of staff change. However, despite a time of instability, the centre has maintained the satisfactory provision for the young children and families who use the centre. Just under half of families in the reach area use the centre. Within the centre’s work there are key strengths. The centre’s care, guidance and support for the most vulnerable group of users are good. Consequently, timely and appropriate support is provided to help adults improve their emotional health and well-being. These groups and individual sessions are well received by parents. The centre supports children with additional needs and vulnerable children well. The use of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF)

prioritises services for vulnerable families, such as two-year-old funding for nursery places. Families appreciate the warm and caring atmosphere, friendly staff and the outreach work. As a result, children make satisfactory progress from their starting points and in their learning and development. Recent data show improvements in narrowing the gap in children's achievement, especially in communication, language and literacy. The progress of vulnerable families is tracked by the centre. However, the centre recognises that as yet systems for routinely establishing a baseline assessment to facilitate tracking all families are yet to be firmly established.

Positive relationships make a tangible difference to the well-being of the vulnerable groups of centre users. A key strength is the safeguarding arrangements which are secure and thorough, as are the effective arrangements for keeping children and families safe. As a result, any concerns related to children's safety are acted upon quickly and appropriately. During centre sessions children play happily and behave well. Parents who are new to the locality report that they appreciate the friends they make through attending the centre. Staff have a commitment to promoting equality and diversity and inclusion is central to the services provided.

The centre shares a working relationship with health and other professionals leading to a coordinated approach in supporting families who use the services. However, the opportunity for local partners to contribute to the evaluation of the impact of the centre's work is in the early stages. Health outcomes for the majority of families using the centre are satisfactory and developing. The centre provides healthy eating learning opportunities for families, for example through the cooking sessions provided at the Hillmead Community Centre. The proportion of mothers within the reach area breastfeeding their child at six to eight weeks mirrors the local authority figures, with about one third of mothers breastfeeding. Restrictions of the children's centre site mean that access to fresh air and outdoor activities such as growing, sand and water and wheeled toys is limited, as are opportunities for buggy walks.

Parents feel that staff members listen to their views about individual sessions. The focus group, which includes parents, meets to reflect on the work of the centre. Some parents are beginning to contribute, such as preparing leaflets about the centre services and distributing these in the local community. The centre values the contribution parents make but recognises that systems for capturing the views of families, including children, and local partners, are not fully embedded in the centre's work.

The centre signposts families to other providers, such as through Somerset Learning and Skills, who run sessions locally. A small number of adults participate in preparation for returning to work courses, such as 'Make Your Experience Count'. These courses are aimed at some of the most vulnerable families and build confidence and self-esteem. However, the centre recognises that it has yet to attract families whose first language is not English to these courses. Families attending courses are improving their economic stability and employability and report that they enjoy the centre activities.

The centre leader shares information with the partnership board which represents four centres locally. Currently, the involvement of the partnership board, including representatives from parents and local settings, in contributing to self-evaluation is limited. Managers recognise the need to create clearer systems for users, staff and professionals to discuss findings from assessment data in evaluating the impact of the centre's work on all families in the reach area.

Senior leaders have a variety of professional backgrounds, including expertise in social care. They understand the centre's strengths and weaknesses and have produced an action plan for improvement. However, the self-evaluation process is not yet formalised. Opportunities for parents to contribute their views towards the effectiveness of the services provided by the centre are just beginning. The centre recognises this is a key area for further development. Actions taken so far to provide good care and guidance for the most vulnerable families and the commitment of the acting centre manager and staff, continue to make a difference to the lives of families. The centre demonstrates a satisfactory capacity to improve.

## What does the centre need to do to improve further?

### Recommendations for further improvement

- Develop opportunities for the wider involvement of local partners and parents in contributing their views, evaluating and developing the services provided by the centre.
- Leaders and managers, including the partnership board, should through self-evaluation, make more effective use of assessment data and information to:
  - evaluate the performance of the centre
  - plan for the needs of all families in the reach area
  - set baselines for all families and so measure progress.

## How good are outcomes for families?

<b>3</b>
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By attending sessions such as the peer support breastfeeding sessions, mothers have gained confidence in breastfeeding their child. The way in which the peer supporters have been trained to help and advise new mothers demonstrates the importance the centre places on this area of work. Mothers, new to the sessions, report that the approach from the peer supporters is friendly and welcoming and, as a result, they feel confident to talk about any worries or concerns they may have. The centre recognises there are less formal systems for following up mothers whose attendance is irregular or for contacting other families in the reach area who do not attend, such as those with English as a second language.

Families are encouraged to focus on the benefits of healthy eating. Advice given to parents at drop-in sessions and health clinics covers all aspects of health, including sleep and diet. Childminders encourage children to eat snacks of fruit and

vegetables. During the inspection youngsters were able to organise themselves independently by sitting at the table and eating snacks of apple with minimal help from adults.

Keeping families safe lies effectively at the heart of the centre’s work. Parents keep themselves and their families safe because they act on the advice they are given by staff who model and advise on best practice. Road safety activities ensure that parents understand how to keep themselves and their children safe. The centre has effective assessment systems in place to ensure the safety of vulnerable children and adults and those families subject to Common Assessment Framework (CAF) processes. Child protection plans are monitored closely. The CAF process supports some vulnerable families well leading to improved outcomes for individual families, such as in their parenting skills.

Relationships are positive. The trust between vulnerable families and the centre staff underpins the centre’s work in helping families overcome difficulties in relationships, returning to work and housing problems. Parents experiencing difficulties report that, ‘There is always some there for you.’ Parenting programmes such as ‘The Triple P’ sessions build parents’ confidence in parenting skills. These sessions provide information and guidance to help parents reflect on opportunities to play and learn with their children. A favourite reported by parents is the opportunity for messy play through painting, collage and model making.

Links with Somerset Learning and Skills are available so that families can access return to work guidance. Parents can access advice, including mock interviews, suitable clothes for an interview and how to fill out a job application form. A few parents take up courses at local colleges to become childminders, but as yet there is not a coordinated approach to supporting potential or new childminders. Of the childminders registered, some have been recently judged outstanding through inspection. For example, during the inspection a childminder competently made observations of a youngster’s development through play, to feed into his personal profile, shared with parents. The centre recognises the need to encourage individual childminders to share their expertise on how children enjoy and achieve with a wider audience.

Some parents share their views and opinions with the centre through the focus group, evaluating sessions and through parent questionnaires. These show that parents are satisfied with the services provided. However, the centre is aware there is less opportunity for parents to influence decision making and centre planning.

These are the grades for the outcomes for families

<b>The extent to which children, including those from target groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them</b>	<b>2</b>

<b>The extent to which all children and parents, including those from target groups, enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships and parents, including those from target groups, contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents, including those from target groups, are developing economic stability and independence including access to training and employment</b>	<b>3</b>

### **How good is the provision?**

<b>3</b>
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The centre provides suitable services and activities that satisfactorily engage the majority of the priority vulnerable groups of users in the community. Experienced members of staff know individual families well and have a secure understanding of the needs of the majority of families in the local area. The centre provides satisfactory support for adults seeking employment and financial advice. As a result, an average proportion of families are helped to maintain their economic stability. For example, parents welcome advice on buying and running a car or budgeting for food. There are some opportunities for adults to develop their literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology skills in courses run, such as preparation for return to work. However, the take up on an employment or career pathway is low.

The quality and range of services are integrated to meet the personal, social, health and safety needs of local families. The children's centre works with health, social care, speech and language professionals to assess and support the needs of families. The Team Around the Child meetings support some of the most vulnerable children by obtaining funding, for example for safety equipment such as stair gates. The family support workers help families through times of crisis and care for individual families are good. This enables the delivery of services to target groups. Case studies provide evidence about the positive difference centre services make to the outcomes of those in most need and who are experiencing problems. Drop-in sessions at the centre with health professionals respond to individual parents' concerns well and signpost to other professionals for additional support. The trusting relationships which develop are used as a stepping stone by the families to access additional services, which are available to them elsewhere, such as those related to housing issues.

Participation rates are improving. However, the take up of courses is variable. For example, the take-up rates for Jump and Jiggle is high. However, for some parenting classes not enough users participate so courses are unable to run. Despite advertising the centre's services locally, the centre manager is fully aware that some hard to reach families within the community, such as those whose second language is not English, do not currently use the centre's facilities. Parents praise the dedication of the staff at the centre and appreciate the 'open door' approach. One



parent summed up the views of many by saying that service provided 'was a lifeline'.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

<b>The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of families, including those in target groups</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups</b>	<b>2</b>

### **How effective are the leadership and management?**

<b>3</b>
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The satisfactory governance and accountability arrangements mean that leaders have a developing understanding of the links between self-evaluation, strategic planning and the provision of services. The partnership advisory board provides an adequate level of support and is in the early stages of using data to challenge the centre leaders on actions taken to improve performance. Equality and inclusion run through the centre's work. Feedback from users shows confidence in how the centre treats all adults and children as individuals. The integration of multi-agency services supports opportunities for children and their families. Partnerships with other services ensure services are integrated. Protocols for the sharing of information between services, partners and other professionals are established. However, in practice the timely and appropriate transfer of information is less effective.

The centre continues to develop a variety of partnership activities which include statutory, private, voluntary and independent providers. For example, working with a local housing group supports courses related to health for the most vulnerable families in the reach area. In this way the centre is making a discernible difference to families, particularly those who are vulnerable, who use the centre services. A partnership agreement has been recently established with Shepton Mallet Infant and Nursery School. The centre is confident that this joint working will further narrow the gap in the achievement of children, further develop services offered, and support their transition to school.

Performance management arrangements for staff are in place. The centre manager supervises staff and ensures that their training needs are up to date, such as first aid and child protection training. The use of resources, including the deployment of staff, volunteers and session workers, and the satisfactory outcomes for families, demonstrate that the centre is providing satisfactory value for money.

Safeguarding arrangements are comprehensive and ensure that all who use the centre are well protected. New parents are routinely made aware of the procedures for child protection. These are followed relentlessly by staff where there are concerns related to children's safety and protection. Policies relating to safeguarding are

available to parents. The entrance area to the children’s centre displays notices relating to services, family information and policies available, such as the complaints policy. Health and safety matters are closely supervised and supported by robust risk assessments. Awareness about child protection matters are closely monitored and supported by effective risk assessments. The systems for staff vetting and recruitment fully meet requirements.

The use of assessment data and evaluation systems by leaders and managers, to improve services further, are in early stages of development. The success of groups, courses and activities are evaluated mainly by the centre leader through discussions with staff and some feedback from parents. The centre knows that it needs to develop more opportunities to engage with local partners, including users to contribute their views into action plans and future decision making.

These are the grades for leadership and management

<b>The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day-to-day management arrangements are clear and understood</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secure improvement in outcomes</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The effectiveness of the centre’s policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services provided by the centre to meet its core purpose</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The extent to which the centre supports and encourages families in the reach area to engage with services and uses their views to develop the range of provision</b>	<b>3</b>

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

Shepton Mallet Infant and Nursery School was inspected as part of the primary school section 5 inspection in November 2009. The inspection of the children’s centre was informed by the findings and judgements at the time.

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## Summary for centre users

We inspected The House Children's Centre on 18 and 19 January 2012. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall with some key strengths.

Your children's centre cares for you well and provides you with a good safe and inclusive environment where you and your children feel safe, valued and respected. The groups run by the centre encourage you and your children to eat healthily. They help you develop your cooking skills and give you advice on budgeting and preparing meals for your family. You report that as a result adults and children in your family benefit from a healthy diet. However, there are less opportunities for you to take part in fresh-air activities outside because of the current restrictions of the centre's site.

Those of you we spoke to told us that you enjoy the activities on offer. You and your children enjoy these activities, such as the Jump and Jiggle, and they are well attended. However, some courses provided are unable to run because of a low take up. From our observations, discussions and case studies, we were able to see that the centre has an impact on your lives. However, the centre knows it is not yet attracting all families in the reach area to services provided, especially those families with English as a second language. The parenting classes give you ideas about supporting your child's learning at home. You told us you particularly like the story and play sacks available to borrow. Childminders told us that children enjoy the number games and activities included in the sacks. You told us how you and your children are benefiting from the advice given to you through the Health Drop-in sessions. The nursery's good provision supports those of you in receipt of the nursery funding and your child's transition to school.

We found that staff are enthusiastic and work with partners, such as health visitors and midwives, to successfully help you to make positive changes to your lives. The centre has a developing partnership with other local groups and schools. Outcomes for users are satisfactory overall. We know that staff listen to your views about the services offered to you. However, we have asked them to develop a system which provides more opportunities for you to contribute to the evaluation of the impact the services are having on your lives.

We can see that children behave in ways that are safe for themselves and others. Toddlers are keen to investigate toys and respond well to you and other adults. During the inspection youngsters independently looked at picture books and keenly investigated blowing washing-up liquid soap suds from their hands with encouragement from adults. Some of you volunteer at the centre, such as the breastfeeding peer supporters and your work is appreciated by parents. However,

the centre is aware that there are fewer opportunities for you to access courses that lead to qualifications. Advice is available on housing, employment and financial matters through signposting to other organisations.

Partnerships with key agencies are satisfactory and improving. This enables good support and guidance to be offered to those of you using the centre's services whose circumstances may make you and your children vulnerable. Staff and partners assess the individual needs of vulnerable families well in order to ensure you receive the correct support. The family support worker helps families who are facing challenging circumstances. Health and social care professionals work together to ensure you and your child thrive. You value the advice you receive about breastfeeding and health related issues.

When you visit the centre you are well looked after and always offered refreshments by friendly staff and volunteers. The good safeguarding arrangements help you to feel safe and free from risks. For example, leaders follow rigorous and robust practices to ensure all adults working in the centre are suitable to do so. Staff are well trained in how to safeguard children and they make you aware of policies and procedures relating to child protection.

The centre adequately plans the use of space and resources and provides satisfactory value for money. The centre manager and her team use a range of information when planning activities. They listen to your views, but these are not yet analysed in depth to review the impact of activities provided for you. The analysis of data and information presented to the centre by the local authority, of the effectiveness of the range services provided for you, is in the early stages. The partnership advisory board of the children's centre supports the centre's work. As yet, members of the board are not yet fully involved in using data to evaluate the centre's performance and so contribute more directly to self-evaluation processes.

It was good to see how you and your babies and children enjoyed spending their time in The House Children's Centre and in the activity sessions provided. The children settle well and families using the services on offer are well supported.

Thank you for your contribution to the inspection.

Yours sincerely  
Jane Neech  
Her Majesty's Inspector

The full report is available from your centre or on our website: [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk).