

# Inspection report for The Valley Children's Centre

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<b>Local authority</b>	Somerset
<b>Inspection number</b>	365748
<b>Inspection dates</b>	5–6 July 2011
<b>Reporting inspector</b>	Mark Lindfield HMI

<b>Centre governance</b>	Local authority
<b>Centre leader</b>	Rachel Bailey
<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	Not applicable
<b>Centre address</b>	The Hayes
	Cheddar
	Somerset BS27 3HN
<b>Telephone number</b>	01934 741693
<b>Fax number</b>	
<b>Email address</b>	<a href="mailto:Cc841@educ.somerset.gov.uk">Cc841@educ.somerset.gov.uk</a>

<b>Linked school if applicable</b>	Cheddar First School 123717
<b>Linked early years and childcare, if applicable</b>	Early Birds Pre-school 142763

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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Royal Exchange Buildings  
St Ann's Square  
Manchester  
M2 7LA

T: 0300 123 1231  
Textphone: 0161 618 8524  
E: [enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk)  
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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 representatives from the local authority, members of the advisory board, parents and carers, centre staff, health professionals and representatives from other partnership organisations.

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

## Information about the centre

The Valley Children's Centre is located on the site of Cheddar First School. It is a phase 2 children's centre designated in 2008 and draws users from Cheddar and surrounding towns and villages. The centre's purpose-built premises opened in 2010 and include a multifunction room used by the school and Happy Kids out of school club. The centre's reach area is a large geographical area of some 140 miles with limited public transport. There are 583 families with children aged 0–5 in the centre's reach area. Fifteen per cent of families within the area are lone parent families.

The centre serves a largely rural community with some isolated areas of deprivation. Seven per cent of families are on workless benefits. A small but increasing proportion of users speak English as an additional language.

The centre is accountable to the local authority and governed directly by an advisory board. The new centre manager was appointed in April this year and also manages two other children's centres in the North Sedgemoor area. The lead centre officer was appointed in May 2011. At the time of this inspection, the centre manager was on holiday.

Early Birds pre-school was registered in 1970 and moved into the current premises in January 2010. The setting provides an Early Years Foundation Stage education for a maximum of 42 children at any one time aged from two to five years. Children's

levels on entry into the setting are generally in line with that expected. The pre-school is managed by a private provider separately from the children’s centre. Early Birds pre-school was previously inspected in January 2011.

## 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**

<b>3</b>
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### Capacity for sustained improvement

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

<b>3</b>
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## Main findings

The Valley Children’s centre’s new facilities are spacious and well resourced and provide a learning environment conducive for children and adults. Over the last year, the move to new premises has seen a rapid increase in the number of families registering at the centre and participating in activities. Systems to evaluate and improve the work of the centre are in place and have involved all staff and members of the advisory board. The advisory board provides support for centre staff and senior leaders. All are involved in honestly and accurately evaluating the work of the centre and identifying clear priorities for the future. In securing satisfactory or better outcomes, increasing the proportion of users accessing services and identifying appropriate areas to develop, the centre has demonstrated its satisfactory capacity to improve.

The centre has developed a range of effective partnerships and these help to ensure that its overall effectiveness in improving outcomes for families is satisfactory. Developing partnerships with health professionals have resulted in parents accessing a wide range of good health services. Ante-natal, post-natal, breastfeeding support and sessions specifically for parents of multiple births have helped to ensure health-related outcomes are good for the majority of families. In providing a weekly baby clinic on site, the centre has increased families’ awareness of the activities and services on offer.

Parents are appreciative of the centre and quick to identify the difference that members of staff had made to their families. Few users attend advisory board meetings; however, when facing important decisions, the centre invites all parents to express their views and ideas. Users participated fully in appointing new members of staff. Through role-play activities and small group discussions, adults helped plan and develop the new building and ensure that the facilities met the needs of parents

and young children. Parents and carers explained how their views are sought informally during signing sessions for parents, carers and babies, where staff discussed future sessions. Adults complete written evaluations during some activities, but these do not consistently provide helpful information on how to develop learning for children and adults.

Staff provide sufficient support to ensure that overall, users are satisfactorily improving their economic stability and well-being. Children are helped to make good, and some children outstanding, progress in developing their skills for the future. The centre links with local housing support and a 'floating housing' scheme to help users to access appropriate residential accommodation. Case studies show that some parents have been supported by the centre to find suitable employment and to participate as volunteers. Families reported that staff at the centre have helped them to secure carers' allowances and disability living allowances. However, partnership arrangements with other agencies have provided limited support for users to develop their economic well-being. The centre recognises that links with adult education providers are underdeveloped. The services commissioned to provide financial and employment advice and guidance for users have had limited impact and the proportions of vulnerable users accessing professional support is low.

The centre's staff are providing good personalised support for families facing challenging circumstances. The quality of support is appropriate to families' needs and makes a discernible difference to their lives. Safeguarding arrangements meet requirements and include an appropriate range of guidance for staff. Child protection files show clear recording and sharing of concerns with appropriate agencies. Records of contact with families are detailed and include clear timescales and monitoring procedures to ensure that the risk of harm is reduced.

The engagement of vulnerable families within the centre's reach area is satisfactory overall but is variable. This is because the centre is not making full use of available information and data to ensure equality of opportunity for all adults. Information on local births, rates of breastfeeding, smoking cessation and immunisation rates are not routinely shared by health partners with the centre. Senior leaders and local authority representatives have access to data on participation rates but this information is not fully utilised to ensure the centre takes steps to increase the proportions of vulnerable users accessing services. The local authority's current annual performance management arrangements lack sufficient rigour to ensure partnership arrangements are improving services for families.

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

### **Recommendations for further improvement**

- Improve opportunities for parents to develop their economic stability and independence including access to training and employment.
- Make more effective use of information and data held by the centre, health partners and local authority to provide a sound analysis of the needs of vulnerable groups of users within the area.
- Ensure the local authority rigorously evaluates the effectiveness of commissioning arrangements with key partners so that they provide appropriate support for families, especially the more-vulnerable groups.
- Ensure that services and activities are more closely matched to users' needs by encouraging users to participate in regular, purposeful evaluations and become more actively involved in the governance of the centre.

## How good are outcomes for users?

<b>3</b>
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Health data and information confirm that a high proportion of parents within the local area breastfeed their children at birth. Parents report that the support of health professionals at the centre was invaluable in helping to sustain their breastfeeding. A parent volunteer provides additional support and encouragement to parents. As a result, the proportion of parents sustaining breastfeeding beyond four months is above average.

Adults appreciate opportunities to interact with other parents and carers during the centre's activities and they develop close and supportive social groups. Families facing challenging circumstances are helped to improve their emotional well-being because staff are readily available to talk through concerns. Parents feel secure in asking for advice and staff make time during sessions to talk and offer support to parents individually if asked. Parenting programmes help adults to manage stress and increase their social interactions. Several parents report that these sessions help to reduce their sense of isolation and increase their personal skills and self-confidence.

The centre has used adults' views to adapt and modify services, and this has helped to increase participation levels. Parents explained that where they were not specifically asked, their views are sought informally. Parents felt they could contribute their ideas, as observed during discussions at the end of a baby group session. Users were actively involved in interviewing new members of staff and in helping to plan the new premises. In some activities, adults are asked to contribute written evaluations but these provide general information and do not provide specific feedback on the progress made by children and adults during the session.

Parents enjoy many of the sessions and recognise the good quality of parenting programmes such as 'Playing up'. Children showed good enjoyment playing eagerly

with a parachute during 'stay and play' sessions and laughing with obvious delight while parents joined in singing along. BEEP sessions help parents to use sign language to develop their communication with their babies from an early age. Many of the sessions help parents to develop a clearer understanding of children's development.

The centre has clear defined procedures for recording and reporting child protection concerns so that the risk of harm is reduced. Safeguarding training for staff and local childminders has helped to increase awareness. Staff in the Early Years Foundation Stage setting help to keep children safe by using puppets and Somerset Total Communication to help children with limited communication skills to express their concerns and show their emotions. Children with special educational needs and/or disabilities are helped to access appropriate support and resources by a range of professional agencies.

A number of adults have been supported by centre staff to find suitable employment. Staff help adults to complete application forms and apply for benefits. Young parents have received helpful and timely support to develop their confidence to apply for training courses.

These are the grades for the outcomes for users

<b>The extent to which children, including those from vulnerable groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles</b>	<b>2</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>3</b>
<b>The extent to which all users 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 users 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 are developing economic stability and independence including access to training and employment</b>	<b>3</b>

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

**3**

Assessments for individual children are detailed with a clear focus on their interests and development. Staff in the pre-school setting audit children's progress at the end of the first term and use that information well to plan to meet their needs. Children with individual needs are provided with opportunities to play in quiet areas and staff work closely with those children who benefit from sign language.

The centre works in partnership with a range of agencies to ensure the early identification and assessment of children with special educational needs and/or disabilities. Regular and well-attended multi-agency meetings involving outreach

centre staff and health professionals help to provide organised support and close monitoring of vulnerable children. Representatives from the link school described how this approach has helped to ensure smooth transition of children into local education settings.

Participation rates are improving in the centre from low levels. The wide range of health services and the popular pre-school in the centre ensure increased numbers of families are accessing services and are aware of activities on offer. Good-quality 'stay and play' sessions have increased in popularity because staff listen to parents and have made amendments to session timings. There are good-quality imaginative activities across all areas of learning in the Early Years Foundation Stage setting. Regular reflection sessions, involving all staff, are used to discuss children's interests and plan future learning. A stimulating and cosy environment is provided for babies and young children in baby group sessions where activities help parents to develop their confidence in using readily available resources to help their children develop. Parents reported that the centre provides less opportunities and activities for families with children over 18 months and for parents of new births who are not attending breastfeeding support sessions.

Experienced members of staff and health visitors working across children's centres in the area have developed a secure understanding of the needs of local families. Staff respond well to individual cases and provide timely and effective support for families during times of crisis. The centre's family support workers are providing good support for some families and personalised support where appropriate to make a discernible difference to their lives. The engagement of more-vulnerable families is variable and not closely targeted because the centre is not making effective use of information and data on the proportions of vulnerable groups within the children's centre reach area. There is some evidence that the centre is raising the participation rates of lone parents, minority ethnic groups and fathers.

There is good-quality support for users to develop their healthy lifestyles and to support families facing challenging circumstances. However, the support provided by partner agencies in helping users to gain qualifications and in providing financial advice and careers information is limited. Parents hoping to return to work described the difficulties presented by the low numbers of childcare places for children aged 0–2 years in the local area.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

<b>The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all users</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of users and the wider community</b>	<b>3</b>

<b>The quality of care, guidance and support offered to users within the centre and the wider community</b>	<b>3</b>
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## **How effective are the leadership and management?**

<b>3</b>
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Strong leadership has seen the successful development and relocation of the centre into new premises and facilities. Senior leaders and managers know the centre's strengths and areas for development. Despite changes in staffing and leadership, the centre has focused on improving areas of weakness and gaps in provisions, and maintained satisfactory day-to-day management. With the involvement of staff and the advisory board, senior leaders have developed clear plans and targets aimed at improving outcomes for families. The new centre manager has instigated 'healthy child' meetings involving health professionals, outreach and centre staff. These have developed a more streamlined and time-saving approach to assessing families' needs and providing coordinated support.

Most partners are involved in planning and some services are integrated. Senior leaders of pre-school settings have encouraged staff to attend centre sessions so that they are more able to signpost users to services. The local authorities' recent restructuring of finance and administrative support has maintained regular monitoring of expenditure and clear budgeting procedures. In extending the role of centre managers across a cluster of children's centres, the local authority has ensured that expenditure on staffing and professional development has been streamlined. These arrangements continue to promote satisfactory or better outcomes for users and, as a consequence, the centre is providing satisfactory value for money.

The centre promotes inclusion satisfactorily; equality and diversity are regular agenda items and included in all supervision. The centre's Early Years Foundation Stage teacher has made a rapid start in evaluating the centre's support for other education settings. She has delivered training and support to develop the teaching of early reading skills and narrow the achievement gap across the local area. The centre provides well-organised support for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities. A wide range of professionals regularly attend the centre and are quick to identify children's individual requirements and to provide appropriate support.

Clear procedures are in place to check the suitability of staff to work with children prior to their appointment. The centre's safeguarding policy meets requirements and includes an appropriate range of guidance for staff on recording procedures and sharing concerns. While the policy contains no specific reference on supporting children with communication difficulties, inspectors observed practice within the Early Years Foundation Stage setting which helps children to express and share their concerns.

Partnerships with health professionals are strong and continue to develop. Close links with the local school have resulted in shared resources and a more integrated approach in supporting children with additional needs and/or disabilities. The centre has good links and provides effective support for childminders in the area. The centre's early years support officer has established strong links with a range of early years providers and, through regular attendance, they share and develop good practice.

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 extent to which ambitious targets drive improvement, provision is integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of users and the wider community</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>3</b>
<b>The extent to which evaluation is used to shape and improve services and activities</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services the centre has been commissioned to provide</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>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</b>	<b>3</b>

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

An inspection of the registered Early Birds early years provision was carried out in January 2011 under section 49 of the Childcare Act 2006. The report of this inspection is available on our website: [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk) The judgements made during that inspection have been used to inform this inspection of the children's centre.

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## Summary for centre users

We inspected The Valley Children's Centre on 5 and 6 July 2011. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

We enjoyed the opportunity to visit the new premises and noticed how the new resources and large rooms make the centre a welcoming and attractive place to visit and spend time in. The Early Birds pre-school and prenatal and baby clinics run by health have all helped to increase the numbers of families making use of the centre.

The centre has developed links with a number of other organisations which provide a wide range of help and support for you. Health workers provide a good range of antenatal and postnatal sessions in the centre. The breastfeeding sessions are providing valuable support and helping many of you to continue to breastfeed your children. The sessions for parents of twins and triplets attracts families from a wide area across Sedgemoor.

Senior leaders have shown strong leadership in developing the centre from its early days and in ensuring the quality of the new premises. Together with members of the advisory board, they have a sound understanding of the centre's strengths and areas to develop. Staff, advisory board and senior leaders have produced a business plan which contains actions to address weaknesses and bring improvements to the centre. The centre gathers information about attendance at activities and health partners hold information on new births in the area. We have asked the centre and local authority to make more use of this information to identify families in the area who need support but are not receiving it.

The centre asks for your views and opinions especially over the large decisions. Many of you were invited to take part in role-play activities and help plan and develop the new centre building. Some of you took part in the appointment of new staff and sat on interview panels. You are often asked by the centre informally to give your views on sessions and activities you have taken part in. We have asked the centre to consult with you and to gather your views more often so that they can match services closely to your needs. We would like to see more of you helping the centre to develop by sitting on the advisory board.

A number of families are helped to access appropriate housing by members of the centre staff. Some of you described the support you receive from staff in completing application forms and benefit claims. A number of you have been able to return to work or to gain jobs because of the work and support of centre staff. However, the support from partners in providing financial advice, careers and employment guidance, and in accessing training and qualifications, has been limited. We have asked the local authority and the centre to work together to improve arrangements so that families are helped to improve their economic stability and well-being.

Thank you to all of you who took the time to speak to us and share your views. We appreciated the way you welcomed us.

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