

Summarised inspection findings

Dalmellington Primary School Early Childhood Centre

East Ayrshire Council

28 April 2026

HM Inspectors gathered evidence to enable us to evaluate the ELC's work using three quality indicators from the Quality improvement framework for the early learning and childcare sectors. This document provides our summarised findings.

Key contextual information

Dalmellington Early Childhood Centre (ECC) is part of Dalmellington Primary School in the accessible rural village of Dalmellington, in the Doon Valley in East Ayrshire. The ECC is situated in a shared campus with the primary school, a secondary school and a leisure centre. It is a standalone building, a short walk from the primary school. It contains a playroom, family room, kitchen and secure outdoor play space. Children use learning spaces in the primary school regularly for physical activities, to join assemblies and, at times, eat in the dining hall. Staff make extensive use of the local area and community to broaden children’s learning experiences.

The ECC provides early learning and childcare to children from the age of three to those not yet attending primary school. It operates term-time from 8.45 am until 2.45 pm. All children use their entitlement funded early learning and childcare within this ECC. The ECC is registered to accommodate 32 children at any one time. The ECC roll at the time of the inspection was 14.

The headteacher of the primary school leads the ECC. She joined the school in an acting position in April 2025 and the post became permanent in August 2025. A senior early years practitioner has day-to-day responsibility for staff, children and families. Two full-time early years practitioners support her. A representative from East Ayrshire Council supports the work of the ECC on a planned basis.

Curriculum	good
This quality indicator highlights the importance of placing the needs, interests, rights and progress of children at the centre of curriculum design and implementation. <u>Curriculum</u> is defined as the totality of all that is planned for children from ELC, through school and beyond. It emphasises that children are entitled to a curriculum underpinned by the <u>principles of curriculum design</u> and enriched through meaningful learning experiences indoors, outdoors and within the community. It recognises the need for all children to experience opportunities to develop the interests, knowledge, skills, and attributes they will need to adapt, thrive and achieve in today’s world. This quality indicator also recognises the importance of the curriculum supporting progress in children’s learning as they enter the setting and at key points of transition. The themes are: • curriculum rationale and design • continuity and progression in the curriculum • partnerships • skills for life and learning	

■ Senior leaders and staff worked together closely to develop a values-based curriculum rationale for the ECC. They share a deep understanding of what makes their ECC unique. The vision, values and aims within the small rural setting capture the ambition all staff have for children. Senior leaders and staff place a high value on professional learning and child-centred pedagogy. They should continue as planned to deepen their knowledge and understanding of the curriculum further. Senior leaders and staff are developing an engaging and relevant curriculum through a focus on their rural community, nature and the outdoors, community links

and intergenerational connections. Underpinning this work are the needs and views of children and their families.

- Senior leaders and staff, as part of their continuous curriculum development, are increasingly providing all children with high-quality progressive learning experiences in all curricular areas. Staff, with support from local authority representatives, reviewed their approaches to planning learning across the curriculum. This is helping them identify clearly children's prior learning, interests and capabilities in all aspects of their learning. This important piece of work, based on sound self-evaluation, is beginning to build a broader, coherent curricular experience for all children.
- Staff ensure outdoor learning is an embedded aspect of children's learning every day. Children thrive outdoors, leading their learning by following their interests. Staff have well-considered plans in place to develop further the richness of children's outdoor spaces to help extend and deepen their learning. Senior leaders and staff regularly reflect on and evaluate the quality of the curriculum they provide. This is ensuring the curriculum is engaging and relevant for all.
- Senior leaders and staff have agreed approaches for transition arrangements. Staff work closely with families to establish detailed care plans when children join the ECC. Almost all children transition through to the school when they begin P1. They are familiar with the environment as they take part in learning experiences in the school weekly. Children benefit from P6 'buddies' for support as they begin their programme of transition activity. Staff in the ECC and school liaise well together to share children's progress. They continue to refine how best to ensure continuity and progression for children across the early level.
- Senior leaders and staff link very effectively with the local community. They have close connections with a local residential home for the elderly. Children visit regularly to take part in enriching intergenerational learning experiences. Children, staff and families go for frequent walks in the local community, supporting everyone to learn to use local parks and wild spaces. They use the local shop to purchase ingredients for 'Dalmellington Bakes' as they create their own cookbook. Senior leaders, staff and families review systematically the impact of these partnerships together to ensure they are valuable for all children.
- Children experience a broad range of well-planned, real-life opportunities to develop skills for life and learning. Children visited a local café to bring to life their own imaginative play by ordering and paying for their food. They are gaining a deep understanding of their local community through walks and engaging with local services. Children have fun with digital devices. They enjoy recording their learning through photographs and film clips and use everyday technology when they bake. Staff should continue to broaden children's experiences through and with digital learning. Children are proud of the responsibilities that come with 'Star of the Day' as they complete risk assessments and take responsibility for aspects of the playroom.

Learning, teaching and assessment	very good
This quality indicator focuses on how children benefit from access to high quality spaces and well-established routines that help them feel secure and ready to engage. It explores how children are supported to build positive relationships, regulate their emotions, and purposefully participate in a wide range of motivating learning experiences. It demonstrates the importance of staff having a high level of skill supported by strong pedagogical leadership. This includes a clear understanding of pedagogy, the concept of play, how children learn, children's rights and children's behaviour. It places value on high quality relationships, consistent expectations, and skilled interactions that enable children to sustain engagement, follow routines, and build independence in their learning. This indicator highlights the importance of observing and interacting sensitively with children to plan and assess their learning. It recognises the value of involving children fully in planning their learning indoors, outdoors and within the local community. This quality indicator emphasises the importance of robust tracking and monitoring of children's progress to ensure practitioners know all children very well as learners. The themes are: • children's learning and engagement • interactions to support learning • planning and assessment • tracking and monitoring	

- Senior leaders and staff create a joyous and welcoming ethos for children and families. They nurture and support children very well, using their deep knowledge of each child. This ensures that children feel secure and ready to play. Almost all children demonstrate independence on arrival. They are confident, follow familiar reassuring routines and explore the engaging indoor and outdoor learning environments. Staff respond promptly to children's needs. They offer one-to-one support, when necessary and as a result, almost all children are happy and settled.
- Staff listen attentively to children's interests and use their comments to enrich learning opportunities. For example, they extend sensory play in the home corner by including herbs and spices to offer children real-life experiences. Staff interact calmly and sensitively. They draw on their strong understanding of children's individual development and learning needs to sustain children's engagement. Almost all children remain focused for extended periods, and staff gently re-engage those who require support to sustain their play.
- Staff, through professional learning alongside local authority support staff, use questioning skills very well. This is enabling them increasingly to engage, motivate and broaden children's understanding through learning experiences. Staff use open-ended questions and involve children in high-quality conversation that helps them question, explore and investigate. For example, children predict and test how high they can stack the wooden blocks, demonstrating curiosity, perseverance and problem-solving.
- Children work closely with staff to understand their learning targets and how they can achieve them. Staff share these with children and families in a meaningful way. Children are proud of their achievements at home and in the ECC. Staff ensure children's individual targets are

developmentally appropriate and enable them to make progress at a rate that is right for them.

- Staff observe children skilfully and gather valuable information to create clear plans for learning with a balance of continuous, intentional and responsive planning. They include helpful information about children's voice, their views and observations and those of families. Staff respond to children's interests effectively to shape high quality learning experiences. They use daily review and regular team meetings efficiently to share what they know about children's learning, development and progress. Staff engage in moderation of their observations to ensure they are capturing consistently high-quality evidence of children's development and progress. They use this information very well to identify children's next step in learning. Staff are highly reflective and should continue as planned to consider how children can be more involved in the planning cycle.
- Children are proud of their electronic learning journals. Staff support them enthusiastically to select items they wish to include and share with their families. Families are highly supportive of the ECC. They welcome regular communication from staff about their child's experiences through the online journal and in person.
- Senior leaders, staff and local authority support staff are confident in using the local authority learning journal tracker to keep a close check on children's progress. They monitor individual children's progress increasingly well. This is ensuring they have the right information to intervene when children need additional support to learn and make continuous progress. Staff, alongside local authority support staff are beginning to incorporate all areas of the curriculum more explicitly as they track and monitor children's progress. This will help children make the best possible progress in all aspects of their learning.

Wellbeing, inclusion and equality	very good
This quality indicator highlights the importance of positive relationships and children's wellbeing. It recognises the importance of providing high quality, inclusive, and appropriate rights-based support. These approaches result in improved outcomes for children's learning, wellbeing and participation. It takes full account of children who may require additional support to access and benefit fully from their entitlement to high quality ELC. This includes identifying and assessing their learning and wellbeing needs in a timely manner and providing personalised and targeted support. This quality indicator recognises that strong, collaborative partnership working between those supporting children is essential. It highlights the importance of meaningful engagement with children and families to inform decisions about how children's needs should be met. This quality indicator emphasises the important role senior leaders play in ensuring all staff have relevant and worthwhile professional learning to meet the diverse and sometimes complex needs of children. The themes are: • positive relationships and wellbeing • universal support • Identifying and assessing learning needs and targeted support • inclusion and equality	

- Senior leaders and staff place children's wellbeing and rights at the heart of everything they do. They aspire for children to make the most of their time at the ECC and they use consistent approaches to maximise attendance. When children do not attend as expected, staff take prompt action in establishing children and their families are well and that there are no barriers to attendance.
- Almost all children demonstrate a strong sense of home when they come to the ECC. They guide staff in selecting play materials they would like and influence the rhythm of their day. Children benefit from the freedom to choose indoors or outdoors to learn for most of the day. They enjoy the proximity to their friends and to staff who have a sound understanding of their needs. Children look after their own needs very well and enjoy relaxed mealtimes where they can rest and reflect. They are learning to sit together and try a variety of foods.
- Senior leaders, staff and local authority staff use agreed strategies for all children to support their wellbeing. They plan universal support thoughtfully for all children within their small ECC. This enables children to learn about their rights, social and emotional wellbeing meaningfully and overcome any barriers they face. Children understand how to keep themselves safe, healthy and what it means to show respect for others. Where children need extra help to regulate their emotions, staff provide calm spaces and familiar resources which help children talk about their feelings. As a result, the ECC is a calm, respectful space for all children.
- Senior leaders and staff work very closely together to meet the learning and wellbeing needs of children who need additional support to learn. They use playroom observation and

information from families thoughtfully to begin the process of identifying the support children need. Staff work closely with each other to plan targeted interventions to enable children to overcome barriers to their wellbeing and progress. They are skilled in offering these well-planned interventions and work as a team to do this consistently well. Staff monitor closely the impact of short-term interventions, reviewing and sharing information with families. Children who need longer-term additional support plans have them in place. Staff devise them alongside senior leaders and appropriate outside professionals. The views of families are integral to these plans, reviews and next steps. Staff ensure the learning spaces and experiences they provide are well-matched to children's learning needs. This gives all children who have barriers to learning the best opportunities to overtake their individualised targets.

- Senior leaders and staff in the ECC, and from the local authority, share a deep understanding of the needs of children and families within their rural community. They appreciate the challenges families face accessing services. They support families very well in making the most of the locality. Staff have authentic and trusting relationships with families. This enables them to offer timely support and advice. Staff work hard to reduce barriers to inclusion and seek guidance and appropriate professional learning to address the barriers they observe. Senior leaders and staff gather, analyse and use helpful data to address any barriers to children's learning. This is enabling them to measure the progress children make through the interventions they provide and adjust as required. These approaches are helping to improve outcomes for children.
- Staff demonstrate through their actions and interactions that they value and cherish every child and what they contribute to the ELC. They use families' own cultures well to enhance children's understanding of diversity. Staff recognise they need to continue to find meaningful ways to broaden children's understanding of diversity and the wider world beyond their rural community.

Safeguarding

- The setting submitted self-evaluation information related to child protection and safeguarding. Inspectors discussed this information with relevant staff and, where appropriate, children. In addition, inspectors examined a sample of safeguarding documentation. Areas for development have been agreed with the setting and the education authority.

Practice worth sharing more widely

The ECC is a small, accessible rural provision. There are two staff and one senior early years practitioner. A few children have additional support needs. Almost all children live locally and transition into the primary school. Almost all live in SIMD deciles one and two.

East Ayrshire Council provides access to a teacher on a planned basis, for significant periods of time through their teacher access programme. At the time of the inspection the teacher attended three days per week.

The teacher role, in collaboration with senior leaders and staff, is making a measurable difference to children's learning, wellbeing and progress.

The headteacher is gaining knowledge of the early years sector. The senior early years practitioner is building confidence. The teacher shares her knowledge and understanding effectively. The work of the teacher has improved continuity and progression in the curriculum through moving beyond health and wellbeing, literacy and numeracy. She has supported the team to review their approaches to planning for learning to make it more manageable and effective for two core staff. The teacher models skilled interaction, the writing of observations of children's learning and reviewing their progress. She has guided staff in having confidence in their approaches to universal support as they meet children's learning and development needs.

The teacher is an equal member of the nursery staff team. Relationships are very strong across the team. Her skilled approach to modelling and professional learning has built the confidence and capacity of staff. The positive impact on children is measurable. This is evident through self-evaluation activity.

Explanation of terms of quantity

The following standard HMIE terms of quantity are used in this report:

All	100%
Almost all	91%-99%
Most	75%-90%
Majority	50%-74%
Minority/less than half	15%-49%
A few	less than 15%

Other quantitative terms used in this report are to be understood as in common English usage.

On behalf of His Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Education in Scotland.

