

Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) setting shared inspection report

Hill of Fearn ELC

The Highland Council
20 January 2026

In October 2025, a team of inspectors from Education Scotland and the Care Inspectorate visited Hill of Fearn ELC. During our visit, we talked to parents/carers and children and worked closely with the headteacher and staff.

Key inspection findings

- The leadership of the headteacher is impacting positively on the quality of learning and teaching. She works very effectively with staff to identify accurately aspects to be developed and together, they are implementing continuous improvements. This includes ongoing developments to how staff plan for and record children's learning.
- Children are happy, settled and making positive progress in their learning. Staff should continue to develop their strong partnerships with parents to include them more in their child's learning.
- Children were well supported by nurturing, caring staff who provided kind, responsive and individualised care. They worked closely together to promote continuity of care across the day and throughout children's experiences.
- Staff skilfully supported child-led experiences which enabled children to build confidence and independence. They would now benefit from regular opportunities to reflect together on changes in practice and their impact on outcomes for children.

HM Inspectors and the Care Inspectorate gathered evidence to enable us to evaluate the setting's work using four quality indicators from [the Quality improvement framework for the early learning and childcare sectors](#).

Quality Indicator	Evaluation
Staff skills, knowledge, values and deployment	good
Learning, teaching and assessment	good
Nurturing, care and support	very good
Children's progress	good

Summary of inspection findings

Key contextual Information

Hill of Fearn ELC is part of Hill of Fearn Primary School. The setting is registered for 15 children at any one time. It caters for children aged three to those not yet attending school. There are currently three children on the roll. Children can access their entitlement to funded early learning and childcare (ELC) by attending from 9.00 am until 3.00 pm, during term time. The headteacher of the school has responsibility for the nursery class. She became permanent headteacher in June 2024. The headteacher also has responsibility for Tarbat Old Primary School. Three practitioners work part time across the week. The staff team have worked together for a year.

The nursery is part of the main school building and comprises of a playroom, cloakroom area and children's toilets. Children access a large outdoor area from the playroom. This area is shared, at times, with the P1-3 class.

Leadership: Staff skills, knowledge, values and deployment

Children were supported by staff who were committed to compassionate, responsive care. They demonstrated a clear understanding of how children develop and learn. Their skilled interactions promoted children's confidence and enabled them to explore and play freely. Staff used their shared knowledge effectively to provide safe, developmentally appropriate experiences that positively impacted children's wellbeing. Children were settled, confident and happy as a result.

Staff were keen to take advantage of professional development opportunities that could lead to enhanced outcomes for children. For example, they had recently undertaken training on quality interactions and reflected well on how they had begun to adapt their practice as a result. Each member of the team had also recently taken on responsibility for an area of development within the nursery. They were enthusiastic about being empowered to lead on work on the outdoors, children's rights and play, alongside their colleagues in the school. The head teacher had identified that the team would benefit from having regular opportunities to reflect on and evaluate the impact of changes in their practice on outcomes for children. We agreed that this could enable the head teacher to plan for and provide future professional learning opportunities. Linking these opportunities to planned improvements could help ensure they are responsive to the evolving needs of staff, children and the nursery.

Children were supported throughout their day by staff who communicated well with each other. Communications with families as children arrived and left the setting were consistent and ensured that transitions between school and home were positive. Parents told us that they felt well informed about their child's day. Staff were flexible in their daily roles and responsibilities and moved position around the room to meet children's needs effectively. They worked closely together to promote

continuity of care across the day and throughout children's experiences. This enabled the children to lead their play wherever they wished, either indoors or outdoors.

Staff benefitted from annual appraisals with the head teacher, giving them opportunities to discuss their strengths and opportunities for development as well as their overall wellbeing. Regular meetings and informal check-ins with senior staff were also available and staff told us that they valued these supportive discussions. Staff told us that they felt supported by the leadership team and that their ideas were heard, and this contributed to a positive team ethos.

Children play and learn: Learning, teaching and assessment

Staff have very positive relationships with children and their families. They establish clear expectations and share these with children. As a result, children are settled, happy, confident and increasingly independent as they play and learn together. Children play well together and share resources and take turns very well. Staff follow children's interests and support them consistently to make decisions about what and where they will play. Almost all children engage well, at their own developmental stage, in their chosen experiences. As part of the whole school improvement plan, staff are at the early stages of supporting children to understand their rights. They should continue to embed this important practice to support children to understand their rights.

Working with the headteacher, staff recently developed the playroom and improved the choice of and access to resources. This focus is supporting children to make independent choices about what they want to play with. This session, staff, alongside school staff, are developing the outdoor space to provide improved experiences across the curriculum. Children benefit from walks in the local community and visitors to nursery, where they learn through real-life experiences. As planned, staff could extend the use of the local community and visitors to provide an increasing range of motivating and relevant learning opportunities.

Staff listen carefully to children and use their extensive knowledge of each individual to calmly attune to their needs and how they learn best. As individuals and as a new team, supported by the headteacher, they continue to develop approaches to how they interact with children. This includes the consistent use of well-considered questions and commentary to support and extend children's learning. Recent professional learning is helping staff reflect on how they interact with children. This includes when staff should interact with children through asking questions, modelling and commentary and when to step back and observe. Senior leaders and staff now need to consider approaches to using digital technologies to enrich children's learning, taking account of developmental stages.

Staff observe children carefully to ensure they document each child's significant learning. This valuable assessment information provides evidence that informs accurate judgements about children's progress and what children need to learn next. Senior leaders and staff have created an effective blend of electronic and

paper-based recording of children's learning. This allows children to review their achievements spontaneously whilst also readily providing parents with information about their child's learning. The headteacher and staff recognise that parents could be more involved with their child's learning to further strengthen the effective partnership between home and nursery.

Staff plan an effective balance of child-led and adult-initiated learning. Supported by the headteacher, they make increasingly effective use of experiences and outcomes and progression pathways from Curriculum for Excellence to plan learning. This is ensuring planning is more focused on what children will learn, rather than the activities and resources being provided. Staff use floor books well to involve children in planning and documenting learning. They continue to develop how they use floor books, for example, increasingly identifying and recording the skills children are developing. The headteacher supports this very effectively by undertaking robust review and offering helpful support.

Staff make effective use of local authority developmental overviews to record, track and monitor children's progress in aspects of the curriculum. These overviews, informed by ongoing observations of learning, help identify where children may need support or challenge in their learning. Staff should now extend approaches to tracking of children's progress to other curriculum areas. The headteacher meets with staff termly to review children's progress and helpfully provide support and challenge to ensure children make the best possible progress.

Children are supported to achieve: Nurturing care and support

Children benefited from being cared for by staff who clearly understand that nurturing relationships provide an essential base for children's development. They experienced kind, consistent and sensitive care that supported them to feel safe, loved and respected. For example, staff gently reminded children about safety while encouraging independence and exploration. This approach promoted children's confidence and resilience, supporting their emotional wellbeing.

Staff took an individualised approach to each child's care and knew their needs and preferences very well. They recognised that transitions can vary for each child and tailored their approach accordingly. For example, when children were invited to a story time, they were given time and support to finish their previous activity. They joined in enthusiastically when they were ready and this led to a calm and enjoyable, shared experience for everyone. Transitions into and out of the setting were also well considered and individualised for each child. The decision to open the nursery garden to P1-3 for part of the day was clearly benefiting children in the nursery. This gave children opportunities to play amongst bigger social groups and was contributing to a change in approach to transition into P1.

Children were warmly welcomed into the setting each day and staff skilfully supported each child to settle into the session. Informal chats with families at the door formed part of the overall approach to family engagement. This was further enhanced by stay and play sessions, and invitations to contribute to improvement

work such as preparing the garden for new resources. Links with home, such as taking the 'Shanarri' octopus home, were beginning to enable staff to learn about children's interests outside the setting. This further helped staff to plan for children's care and support in an individualised way. Parents spoke positively about their engagement with the setting and felt welcomed by all staff. This inclusive ethos helped to strengthen relationships between families and staff.

Daily routines helped to promote independence and learning. For example, children completed an emotional check in, chose their lunch order and registered as they settled into the day. They were supported to wash their hands as they came in and before mealtimes, with close supervision and a cheery song. They eagerly took part in preparing the table for snack, wiping tables and cutting fruit. Utensils and crockery were accessible, and children knew where to find them. Mealtimes were relaxed and sociable, with staff and children sitting together. Staff ate their own lunch alongside the children, and this supported supervision, social skills, and language development. Topics of conversation were wide ranging and added to a home-from-home feel, and overall mealtimes were enjoyable and safe.

Children's wellbeing was supported through very effective personal planning, which highlighted their interests, strengths, and needs. Personal plans contained highly individualised strategies to support each child, and these were regularly reviewed and updated with families. The staff team had built up strong relationships with families and this enabled them to be proactive in raising concerns and adapting support to respond quickly to changes in children's lives. This, alongside effective partnerships with other professionals, enhanced the quality and consistency of care. This contributed to positive outcomes for children.

Children are supported to achieve: Children's progress

All children are making good progress, at their individual developmental stage, as a result of their nursery experiences. They are developing positive attitudes to learning and are developing well a range of important skills, including resilience, confidence and independence. Children are excited and motivated learners, for example, as they explore new resources. When required, staff work with other professionals and parents, to create and implement personalised approaches to ensure positive outcomes for all. Staff share important information with parents about aspects of children's progress. They should continue to develop approaches to share information about children's progress across the curriculum.

Staff have a clear focus on the importance of developing children's understanding of health and wellbeing that ensures children are ready to learn. Children are able to describe what makes them happy, sad and worried. They are becoming familiar with the national wellbeing indicators, such as the importance of keeping safe and healthy. They are excited about the new 'shanarri' octopus that they take home to share their developing understanding with parents. As children explore movement, indoors and outdoors, they develop good coordination, balance and physical stamina.

Children demonstrate a good developing understanding of early literacy, numeracy and mathematics in their play. In literacy, children mark make in different contexts and for different purposes. They create self-portraits and begin to accurately form letters. They enjoy listening to stories and exploring texts in depth. In numeracy and mathematics, they enjoy counting, are beginning to recognise numbers and enjoy the challenge of writing numbers. As children investigate outdoors, they explore simple measurement and ordering for size. Staff could maximise opportunities for children's learning in literacy and numeracy through routines and as they continue to develop the outdoor area.

Staff recognise and value children's achievements in very individual ways. Children, where appropriate, play an active role in whole school initiatives, including the pupil council. This introduces them to early leadership opportunities. Children are proud of their awards, for example, for demonstrating important school values. Staff encourage parents to share important achievements from home. They could support children to contribute to the wider community and beyond. This could help children to develop a greater range of skills and attributes as successful learners and effective contributors.

Staff are aware and respectful of the differing needs of children. They respond very sensitively with personalised and well-timed support that takes full account of family circumstances. Senior leaders monitor children's attendance and support families on an individual basis to maximise the benefits of early learning and childcare. Staff readily identify potential barriers to learning and work in thoughtful and responsive ways to minimise any challenges. They could now work more closely with parents and other professionals to evaluate the impact of supports and individual approaches in place to support children. This will help to ensure that the supports are having the desired impact on children's progress. As planned, staff could develop their skills and explore further how to interpret available data. This may help identify when children may need additional support and support further ensuring equity for all children.

Safeguarding (HMI)

Inspectors discussed safeguarding and child protection information provided by the ELC setting with relevant staff and, where appropriate, children. In addition, inspectors examined a sample of safeguarding documentation. At the time of the inspection, there were no identified areas for development.

Outcome of inspection

We are confident that the ELC setting has the capacity to continue to improve and so we will make no more visits in connection with this inspection.

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