

Early learning and childcare (ELC) setting shared inspection report

Hilton of Cadboll Primary School Nursery

The Highland Council

20 January 2026

In November 2025, a team of inspectors HM Inspectors of Education and the Care Inspectorate visited Hilton of Cadboll Primary School Nursery. During our visit, we talked to parents/carers and children and worked closely with the headteacher and staff.

Key inspection findings

- The leadership team demonstrated commitment to making improvements to the nursery and were beginning to embed an ethos of self-evaluation and continuous improvement. They should support staff to access relevant training that enhances their practice and improves outcomes for children.
- Staff create a calm, positive, and nurturing ethos where children feel safe, valued, and ready to learn. They should continue to review daily routines and transitions to help ensure they continue to support children's changing needs and interests.
- With the headteacher's support, staff should ensure observations of children's learning are accurate and meaningful. They should use them to design experiences and spaces that reflect children's interests and deliver a broader, challenging curriculum to encourage deeper, sustained learning.
- The headteacher should take prompt action to embed effective systems for planning for children who may require additional support for their learning and wellbeing. Children should receive timely targeted and reviewed support that reflects their views, their families and appropriate partners.
- The headteacher and staff should develop robust systems for observing, planning, assessing, and tracking children's progress across all areas of their learning. Children's achievements in early literacy, numeracy and wellbeing development should be carefully monitored to ensure they make the best possible progress.

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	Satisfactory/Adequate
Learning, teaching and assessment	Satisfactory/Adequate
Nurturing, care and support	Satisfactory/Adequate
Children's progress	Satisfactory/Adequate

Summary of inspection findings

Key contextual Information

Hilton of Cadboll Primary School Nursery is located in the village of Hilton in Highland. It is registered to provide a day care of children service to a maximum of 40 children aged 3 to those not yet attending primary school. There are currently 12 children enrolled in the service. The nursery is based within the main school building and operates within the hours of 9:00am to 3:00pm during term time. The premises consist of a large playroom, and a smaller playroom with a kitchen area which is used for mealtimes and as a cloakroom. The children have access to a fully enclosed outdoor play area. The headteacher of the primary school is the manager of the service and the newly appointed principal teacher has delegated responsibility for the daily operation of the service.

Leadership: Staff skills, knowledge, values and deployment

Staff consistently demonstrated responsive, nurturing care underpinned by a clear understanding of child development. Their collaborative approach enabled children to explore freely and engage in developmentally appropriate experiences. Children benefited from cuddles and soothing words which supported them to feel settled and contributed to a calm, happy environment. These approaches had a positive impact on children's wellbeing and development.

Interactions were warm and encouraging, with staff using open-ended questions and "I wonder" statements to spark curiosity. Staff communicated effectively and adapted flexibly throughout the day, promoting continuity of care and a sense of security. However, high-quality engagement was occasionally limited during routine tasks or when staff were deployed in an area on their own. This affected their ability to see and respond effectively to children's cues. The leadership team agreed to review the layout of the nursery to address these issues. This would help to ensure that children's needs are consistently met.

Staff showed commitment to continuous improvement through self-evaluation practices, such as the use of floorbooks to track changes. They were beginning to incorporate children's voices, fostering a sense of ownership. To strengthen this, staff should further reflect on the impact of changes and how children's input informs outcomes. Continued use of self-evaluation aligned with best practice would help to ensure that children experience a service that continues to improve over time to meet their needs.

Core training such as child protection and first aid had been completed. However, targeted professional learning to meet individual children's needs and support the

improvement plan was limited. The leadership team had identified training on additional support needs as a priority and had begun to develop individual training records. We advised that staff should be given regular opportunities to reflect on learning and agree on changes to practice as a result. This had the potential to enhance staff confidence and improve outcomes for children. Regular monitoring and observation could also help to identify future learning needs and support continuous improvement (see area for improvement 1).

Staff had time outside of service hours which was allocated for planning and professional development. This ensured that there was continuity of care across the day and children's experiences were positive and safe. However, there were no opportunities for staff to take breaks during the working day. This had the potential to impact negatively on their wellbeing. We advised the provider to review their protocols for staff wellbeing, particularly the arrangements for suitable rest (see area for improvement 2).

Area for improvement 1

To effectively deliver high quality play and learning experiences, staff should access training appropriate to their role and apply the training to their practice. This should include but is not limited to:

- a) using best practice guidance to support high quality interactions and play experiences;
- b) regular opportunities to reflect on training and evaluate the impact of training on outcomes for children.

This is to ensure that care and support is consistent with the Health and Social Care Standards (HSCS) which state that: 'I experience high quality care and support based on relevant evidence, guidance and best practice' (HSCS 4.11)

Area for improvement 2

To support the wellbeing of all staff, the provider should review their protocols for staff wellbeing using the guiding principles of The Health and Care Staffing (Scotland) Act 2019.

This is to ensure care and support is consistent with the Health and Social Care Standards (HSCS) which state that: 'I experience high quality care and support based on relevant evidence, guidance and best practice' (HSCS 4.11).

Children play and learn: Learning, teaching and assessment

Staff actively create a calm and positive ethos across the nursery. They welcome children and families warmly into the setting, quickly establishing secure and trusting relationships. On most occasions staff tune into children's emotional cues and interests, responding attentively with care and sensitivity. This helps most children feel safe, valued, and ready to engage in their learning. They demonstrate confidence and happiness in nursery and interact enthusiastically with their peers during play.

Staff place play at the core of children's learning, designing environments that spark exploration and creativity. They engage thoughtfully with children and apply their understanding of child development to shape motivating spaces that encourage learning opportunities across the curriculum. As a result, children make independent choices and express their ideas with increasing confidence. Staff should now ensure that observations of children's interactions with their learning environment are accurate and meaningful. They should use these insights to design intentionally, experiences, environments, and interactions that respond appropriately to children's interests and needs. This should enable children to access a broader, more balanced curriculum and make progress across all areas of their learning.

Children engage with digital technologies in limited ways during play. Staff consistently use the interactive board well to extend learning and prompt children to reflect on what they have learned. However, staff do not yet embed digital technologies across the setting. This limits children's opportunities to develop creativity, problem-solving, and early literacy and numeracy skills. Building on current practice, staff should prioritise improving access to appropriate digital resources and support children to use technologies creatively. This will ensure digital learning becomes a regular and enriching part of children's play and learning across the curriculum.

Children experience important outdoor learning in the nursery garden, where they enjoy interacting with nature. They interact with experiences and activities which nurture their physical and emotional wellbeing. Staff must now ensure the garden remains open and available to children across the day to maximise fully their learning opportunities. They should build on current practice by using the local community more effectively as a learning resource. This will further deepen children's understanding of their local community and provide more meaningful contexts for exploration and social interaction.

Staff regularly document children's play through observations and photos in digital learning journals. However, most entries describe children's actions without identifying their learning. All staff should now recognise, interpret, and record children's significant learning moments. This should help them to plan next steps for all children, including those who require additional support with their learning. Senior leaders should implement strategies that build staff confidence and expertise in

observing, analysing, and responding accurately to children's learning. This will help staff inform engaging interactions, inspire thoughtful provocations, and guide purposeful planning.

As planned, senior leaders should take steps to support staff in developing a clearer understanding of each child's individual learning progression. Staff currently use developmental milestone planners to record progress across a few key areas of development. However, information gathered is not consistently accurate or reliable. To strengthen assessment practice, staff should begin using Highland Council progression pathways to support the development of children's early literacy and numeracy skills. They should also ensure children are making progress across the four contexts for learning within the Curriculum for Excellence. This should help staff have clearer understanding of children's developing skills and create a robust, accurate picture of individual children's learning and development.

Children are supported to achieve: Nurturing care and support

Children experienced warm, nurturing interactions from staff who prioritised building positive relationships. This supported children to feel safe, valued and secure. Staff responded sensitively to children's needs, offering comfort and reassurance when required. Parents told us that their child was well supported as they settled into the service, and that they appreciated opportunities to share information at drop-off and pick-up times. These informal conversations were enhanced by regular updates on private social media, and termly themed events. Overall, these helped to maintain strong family engagement.

Children's wellbeing was supported through personal plans that reflected their interests and needs. While plans were reviewed termly with families, some lacked up-to-date information or clear strategies of support. This limited the ability of staff to ensure consistent care. Staff had begun to use wellbeing indicators to inform planning for support, which had the potential to strengthen outcomes for children. We made an area for improvement to support the service to ensure that all children's individual support needs are identified and strategies put in place promptly (see area for improvement 1).

Transitions at the start and end of the day did not fully support children's wellbeing. Congestion in the entrance area delayed access to play and limited staff's ability to engage with families. Unclean areas did not reflect a high standard of care and had the potential to impact the wellbeing of children. The leadership team agreed to undertake a full review of the environment, layout and daily routines. As part of this they promptly organised a deep clean of the service. A continued focus on improving transitions and hygiene practices would further enhance children's wellbeing and ensure consistently high-quality care. An area for improvement was made to support this work (see area for improvement 2).

Within the playroom and outdoors, children accessed a range of spaces that promoted emotional wellbeing and independence. Positive relationships were evident, and staff used their knowledge of individual children to provide appropriate care. Staff used inclusive communication strategies, for example makaton, to support children's understanding. Staff were mostly attuned to children's cues, although there were occasions when support was not offered promptly, particularly outdoors.

Mealtimes were sociable and children enjoyed participating in routines such as preparing snack, including vegetables collected from the nursery garden. This promoted knowledge of the wider world and a sense of responsibility. Staff sat with children, encouraging conversation and connection. We advised that reintroducing sharing options on the tables would enable a more homely experience. We also advised that an increase in close supervision of handwashing would contribute to children's wellbeing. The nursery layout combined with the approach to rolling snack was negatively impacting children's ability to choose to play outdoors. We asked the service to review this to better support children's independence and choice (see area for improvement 2.)

Area for improvement 1

To support children's overall wellbeing, the provider should further develop personal planning approaches. This should include but is not limited to:

- a) taking account of the wellbeing indicators
- b) staff understanding and application of strategies in place to support individual children

This is to ensure that care and support is consistent with the Health and Social Care Standards (HSCS) which state that: 'My personal plan (sometimes referred to as a care plan) is right for me because it sets out how my needs will be met, as well as my wishes and choices' (HSCS 1.15)

Area for improvement 2

The provider should undertake a full review of the environment, layout and daily routines to ensure the physical and emotional wellbeing of children. This should include, but is not limited to:

- a) effective arrangements that enable enjoyable and safe mealtimes, timely opportunities for outdoor play and supportive transitions
- b) staff are skilled in identifying and addressing risks and implement this consistently in their practice.

This is to ensure that care and support is consistent with the Health and Social Care Standards (HSCS) which state that: 'My environment is safe and secure.' (HSCS 5.17).

Children are supported to achieve: Children's progress

Staff provide a supportive and nurturing learning environment where the majority of children make satisfactory progress in line with their developmental stage. They provide a range of interesting experiences that support children's learning, including literacy, numeracy, expressive arts, sciences, and technologies. They create spaces that encourage exploration, creativity, and inquiry and reflect the majority of children's interests and skills. Staff now need to ensure that all children are consistently challenged in their learning. This includes planning experiences that build on what children already know and can do and introducing new ideas that extend their thinking. This will help ensure children's learning builds over time and meets their individual needs.

Staff prioritise children's health and wellbeing and understand its importance in helping children feel safe, settled, and ready to learn. They create a caring and respectful environment where children learn to recognise and talk about their feelings through everyday interactions. Children benefit from regular outdoor play, sociable mealtimes, and opportunities to rest which is supporting well their physical and emotional development. To improve this further, staff could embed wellbeing indicators more consistently into daily routines. Through real-life, relevant experiences, children should make sense of their emotions, build resilience, and develop a stronger understanding of themselves and others.

Children develop a wide range of early literacy, communication and numeracy skills through engaging and purposeful play experiences. They express ideas by making marks with different tools and materials. Experiences such as manipulating playdough and hammering pegs strengthen fine motor skills, supporting their ability to write and draw with increasing precision. They enjoy listening to stories and singing songs and rhymes. The majority of children explore early mathematical concepts. They count, recognise shapes, experiment with number formation, and investigate size, order, and measurement. Staff should now take steps to ensure that children have opportunities to develop their early literacy, communication and mathematical skills in real life experiences. For example, staff often miss chances to encourage children to count items, compare quantities, or use descriptive language such as "full," "empty," during snack routines. These everyday routines will offer rich opportunities to reinforce learning in meaningful contexts ensuring children benefit from a stronger holistic approach to their learning.

Staff are beginning to recognise children's achievements and display a few children's successes from home on the nursery "wow wall." They feel recognised and valued, reinforcing that their efforts and achievements are important and valued by others. However, this is not yet consistent for every child. As a result, most children have limited opportunities to reflect on their achievements and successes or understand how these contribute to their overall learning. Staff should actively engage all

children in identifying their achievements to ensure they celebrate success and understand why it matters.

Staff work appropriately with parents and other professionals to offer personalised support where needed, contributing to positive outcomes for a few individual children. They recognise children and their families' needs and take thoughtful steps to reduce potential barriers to their progress and wellbeing. However, the setting does not yet use a robust system for gathering timely and accurate information about all children's progress. This limits the effectiveness of planning and delays targeted support, particularly for children requiring additional support. Senior leaders should adopt more systematic approaches to monitoring and documenting children's progress over time, using this information to inform their planning. This should help ensure that all children receive timely and appropriate support tailored to their individual needs.

Senior leaders should take prompt action to strengthen monitoring processes in relation to children's attendance. They should create regular opportunities to engage families in understanding the importance of consistent attendance in supporting their child's progress and attainment. This should ensure that children have the best possible opportunities to develop their skills, build positive relationships, and experience continuity in learning that supports sustained progress over time.

Safeguarding(HMIE)

- 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. Areas for development have been agreed with the ELC setting and the education authority.

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.

Jacqueline O'Donnell

Bev Douglas

HM Inspector

Care Inspector