

Summarised inspection findings

Dunbeath Early Learning and Childcare Service

The Highland Council

10 March 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

Dunbeath Early Learning and Childcare Service is situated within Dunbeath Primary School. The school is located in the rural village of Dunbeath on the east coast of Caithness. The nursery reopened in August 2024 after a period of temporary closure and the current staff have been in post since August 2025. The nursery is opened during term time from 9.15 am – 3.15 pm and is registered to provide early learning and childcare (ELC) for 10 children aged from two years to those not yet attending primary school. The current roll is seven. During the inspection there were no children present that were aged two. Children attend from Dunbeath and the surrounding villages and have various patterns of attendance.

The nursery has one playroom with kitchen facilities, and the children have access to nearby shared toilet facilities and a cloakroom. There is a fully enclosed outdoor play area. The headteacher has overall responsibility for the nursery and has delegated aspects of this to the principal teacher. Both the headteacher and principal teacher also have leadership and teaching responsibilities for a local partner school. There are two early years practitioners. Their working hours are 9.15 am to 3.15 pm.

Curriculum	satisfactory
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	

- Staff centre relationships, wellbeing and children’s rights to influence the curriculum. Children contribute their thoughts and ideas confidently, which staff value and act upon. This influences well children’s curriculum experiences and learning spaces. Staff now need to build on these strong foundations and work with senior leaders and school staff to develop the curriculum rationale formally. The rationale should build upon the values of kindness, confidence, adventure and the vision of ‘being the best you can be’. It should reflect fully the unique context of the nursery and set out clearly how staff will implement a curriculum for young children. As this develops, staff should ensure they share the purpose of the curriculum with parents and partners. They should be clear on how the curriculum supports children to be successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens, and effective contributors.



- Staff ensure children have opportunities to learn across the curriculum through indoor, outdoor and community experiences. They use the beach, forest and local area well as real-life contexts for children to learn. This includes learning for sustainability. Most children talk confidently about the importance of recycling and caring for the environment. Staff should now seek ways to engage with community members and partners more effectively. This should help to enrich children's experiences such as intergenerational learning and developing early citizenship skills.
- Staff use relevant information from their observations and discussions with children to inform the implementation of the curriculum and planning for children's learning. This builds appropriately on children's prior learning, experiences, and interests. As a result, staff provide experiences that develop children's skills according to their developmental stage.
- Children have valuable opportunities to be involved in the school and learn alongside children from primary classes. These include celebrations and craft experiences. The staff within the nursery are at the early stages of planning a programme that will support children as they transition to primary school this session. In doing so, they should work collaboratively with early level staff in the school to ensure curriculum continuity and progression for children.
- Staff value the contributions parents make to children's learning. They invite them to individual 'working together meetings' to hear about their child's learning and share their children's experiences. Staff are beginning to encourage parents to share their skills and talents with the children. As the team becomes more established, staff should increase and embed parental engagement. This could include parents sharing their skills and expertise more regularly to support further children's learning across the curriculum.

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

- Staff create an ethos that is welcoming and inclusive for children, parents, and visitors. This helps children to settle well into nursery. Since August, staff have continued to review and improve the nursery learning environments to support children's curiosity and creativity. As a result, children are motivated, make choices and access a range of experiences independently to support their learning. They use open-ended and natural materials creatively to support their play both indoors and outdoors. Children engage well with the range of experiences available within the nursery. They particularly enjoy making playdough, being a snack helper, listening to stories and creating models using the new construction materials. Staff consider carefully the range of developmental stages within the nursery and adapt their interactions and learning spaces appropriately. Outdoors, children ride balance bikes confidently, find treasure in the sandpit and experience the feeling of running against the wind in the large outdoor space.
- Staff have a strong knowledge of early years pedagogy and use this to influence their interactions. They provide quality experiences and inviting learning spaces for children. They reflect regularly on the flow of the children's day to ensure an appropriate balance of adult-initiated and child-initiated play. Staff observe children carefully and join their play sensitively, offering provocations to spark children's interests and extend their play. Children and staff engage in conversations throughout their day which results in a family feel within the nursery. Staff interact with children in a calm and relaxed manner. They use their skills well and ask questions at the right time to support and extend children's learning. Staff use effectively the technology available to support children's learning, for example, by exploring counting and watching sea creatures in their natural environment.

- Each child has an individual learning journey which contains observations, relevant learning targets, photographs and samples of children's work. Staff should continue to ensure that they identify consistently the skills children develop. They encourage children to share their learning, and staff record this appropriately within learning journeys. The principal teacher and staff work together well to plan fortnightly for children's learning. They use children's interests and their observations of learning meaningfully to inform planning. Staff make good use of the experiences and outcomes from Curriculum for Excellence to plan learning across the curriculum. They listen carefully to children and are very responsive to their interests and ideas. Staff record this effectively within floorbooks which show depth of learning through specific interests. Staff should continue to embed this approach and ensure they demonstrate consistently the depth, challenge, and progression in children's learning across the curriculum.
- Staff use local authority trackers well to record the progress children make in their developmental milestones, numeracy and early literacy. The principal teacher and staff engage in useful meetings throughout the year to discuss children's progress. Senior leaders should develop an overview of the progress all children make over time as a result of their nursery experience. This would help to identify children's strengths and where there may be areas where individual planning may be necessary.

Wellbeing, inclusion, and equality	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	

- The wellbeing of children and their rights sits at the heart of the nursery's work. Children benefit from the caring and respectful relationships they have with staff. They are happy, settled and confident while at nursery. Children play well together and are developing firm friendships. They demonstrate kindness, share resources, take turns, and help each other. Staff support children well to recognise different feelings and emotions that they may experience. They do this through relevant stories and contexts which help children to talk about how they feel and why. Children talk knowledgeably about how to be safe and keep healthy. Building on this, staff should continue to explore the wellbeing indicators with children to support them to talk further about their wellbeing. They could link the wellbeing indicators to their focus on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- Staff provide snack and mealtimes for children that are calm and social occasions. Children prepare food for snack, using appropriate knives confidently to chop fruit and vegetables and spread butter on their toast. During lunchtimes, children dine within the school hall, which enables them to meet their siblings. They know the routine well, are independent and confidently clear away their dishes. Children and staff engage in meaningful conversations. Staff support and extend children's vocabulary effectively and help children to develop conversational turn taking.
- Staff include all children fully in all nursery experiences. They are fully aware of the developmental stages of each child and adapt their interactions, experiences and spaces appropriately. All children participate enthusiastically during indoor and outdoor play. They

benefit from quality interactions with staff which supports all children's learning and development well.

- Staff support children sensitively as they transition from home into nursery. They meet with parents to gather information on children's health, care needs and previous experiences and record this appropriately in personal care plans. Staff have clear strategies in place to support children with their health, care and development needs. With parents, staff review and update these plans at least every six months.
- Staff work in close partnership with parents when children require additional help with their learning and development. Staff are fully aware of the range of partners that could provide additional support for children and families when required. Within the nursery, staff use helpful strategies to minimise barriers to learning. This includes support for children to develop their communication skills. Senior leaders and staff are aware of their statutory duties in relation to ELC. This includes knowing what needs to be implemented when children require additional support with their learning.
- All children are central to the life of the nursery. Staff demonstrate kindness and respect when interacting with children. The recent family wall brings a sense of security for children as they talk proudly about their families. Staff provide a few opportunities for children to learn about the diverse world in which they live. They should continue to develop this further through relevant resources and experiences.

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.

Explanation of terms of quantity

The following standard Education Scotland 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.