

**HMIE**

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education in Scotland
Luchd-sgrùdadh an Rìgh airson Foghlam ann an Alba

Summarised inspection findings

Baltasound Junior High School Nursery Class

Shetlands Islands Council

9 June 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

Baltasound Junior High School Nursery is situated within Baltasound Junior High School, on the island of Unst in the Shetland Islands. This is the most northerly school on the most northerly inhabited island in the United Kingdom. The school is classified as both rural and remote. The nursery has the use of one playroom and a large outdoor space. There is direct access to the outdoor playground. Children also have use of the school library.

Children can attend nursery from the age of two until starting primary school. The nursery is open during term-time from 8.30am until 4pm and registered for 30 children at any one time. The current roll is 12 children. Children attend from across the island of Unst. Not all children access their entitlement to 1140 hours of early learning and childcare. This is due to parental choice. Overall attendance at nursery is very positive.

The depute headteacher for the school is the named nursery manager and has overall responsibility for the nursery. The nursery team consists of a senior early years practitioner, two practitioners who cover a full-time equivalent post and three support workers who work various patterns over the week. A nursery teacher from the local authority provides support for the setting. In the past two years the nursery has experienced a number of staffing changes.

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	

- Staff have developed an effective curriculum built upon the school values of ready, respectful and safe and the unique context of Shetland. Staff have used national guidance, professional learning and research meaningfully to deepen their knowledge and improve further their pedagogy. As a result, staff have a clearer understanding of different pedagogical approaches that influence their curriculum. Staff have improved the nursery environment to give children greater access to a wider range of open-ended and natural resources. As a result, children’s interests and creativity are supported well.

- Children choose to play outdoors for extended periods of time. Staff are currently developing the outdoor area and are increasing the range and type of resources and experiences for children. This includes the installation of 'Da Hut' to provide shelter and space where children continue to play during inclement weather. As planned, staff should continue to ensure children access a wide range of experiences outdoors. This will help to support children to explore, investigate and be imaginative in their play. Staff use floorbooks as a way of recording children's learning experiences across the curriculum. Building on this, they should review their approach to make sure they demonstrate clearly how children learn in depth and progressively across the curriculum.
- Staff take very strong account of the island context and respect each child's needs and interests. They ensure the wide range of learning opportunities offers breadth across the curriculum. Staff should now seek ways to demonstrate clearly the knowledge, skills and attributes children develop as a result of their nursery experience.
- The staff team work very well together to gather and record information about children's prior experiences and learning. They use this information well to influence curriculum planning to ensure nursery experiences are meaningful and relevant to children. Staff work collaboratively with school colleagues to provide a smooth transition for children into P1. They engage in professional dialogue regularly to ensure a shared understanding of early years pedagogy which supports meaningful continuity for children. Staff provide a wide range of helpful experiences for children to become familiar with the school and teachers. Staff share valuable information on children's learning with the teacher of P1 to support continuity and progression for all children.
- All staff know the community and local context very well. They make very effective use of partners within the school context and community to enrich the curriculum. They use the skills of community members, staff and pupils purposefully to broaden children's experiences. For example, children enjoy and engage well with fun music and storytelling sessions. Children particularly enjoy visits from the 'Jarl Squads' which enable children to celebrate their culture in a meaningful way. Recently, the setting has received an interactive board. Staff continue to develop their skills in helping children to use this new resource.

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 promote and uphold the rights of children through the nurturing, respectful and inclusive ethos which they have created. They value children as individuals with their unique personalities and needs. Children benefit greatly from positive relationships with staff. They settle well into nursery and feel confident and secure with staff. When required, staff offer children reassurance to ensure they feel comfortable and content within the setting.
- Children choose to play alone, alongside others and in small groups within the calm and relaxing environment. When together, they play cooperatively with their friends. A few children share what it means to be kind and how to show kindness to others.
- Staff provide children with extended periods of uninterrupted play which gives children time and space to follow their interests. Almost all children engage meaningfully with the well-considered range of experiences that support children's varying stages of development. This includes sensory and open-ended resources that children explore and investigate. For example, the youngest children enjoy filling and emptying containers and making pretend soup in the mud kitchen.
- Staff have a good understanding of early years pedagogy and child development. They adapt skilfully when they interact with children, to ensure all children are included fully in a developmentally appropriate way. Staff are mindful of the different ways children communicate. They observe closely for cues and listen carefully to children and respond appropriately. Within the team, staff have varying levels of skills and expertise. They support each other very well, including using peer evaluations, which helps the team to continually improve their practice.

- Increasingly, children have the opportunity to use technology to support their learning. For example, children help staff to create the online shopping order. The team should continue to increase the range of technology available to support children's play and to enable them to use technology in real-life experiences.
- Staff observe children at play and record their observations within each child's 'learning story', along with samples of their artwork and photographs. Moving forward, staff should ensure observations have a consistent focus on the key skills children are developing. This could help staff to identify clearer next steps that will support children's learning or provide suitable levels of challenge.
- Staff involve parents in children's learning in a range of meaningful ways. This includes stay and play sessions, making floorbooks visible, celebrations and having a 'bring your parent to physical education day'. Parents appreciate being involved in the life of the nursery and seeing their children learn through play.
- When planning for children's learning, staff take good account of children's interests, ideas, community, and cultural events. Their approach to planning is mainly responsive. Moving forward, staff should consider how to improve the balance between responsive and intentional planning. They should make more effective use of the helpful data they have about children's learning to support this process.
- Staff use a range of monitoring and tracking approaches effectively to measure the progress children make in their learning. Senior leaders and staff use this information well along with their professional judgements to determine the progress children make as a result of their nursery experience. Where children require additional help, staff provide this timeously through experiences, learning spaces or targeted support.

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	

- Staff ensure exceptionally strong, positive, trusting relationships with the wellbeing of children and families as central to the work of the nursery. They continually strive to do their very best to make a difference for children and are highly effective in doing so. This reflects strongly, the school vision 'For all stakeholders of our peerie (wee) school, to do all we can, to make our children's big dreams come true'. Staff work very well as a team to support all children to be independent, confident and resilient. They are very positive role models for children and demonstrate kindness and respect. They respond to children in a consistently calm and gentle way. When required, staff give children essential time often on a one-to-one basis. As a result, children are thriving, relaxed and happy.
- Children confidently use language associated with the national wellbeing indicators. Increasingly, they are involved in identifying risks and discussing how to keep safe. Children are becoming independent and responsible as they help to set up for snack and mealtimes. Due to the small numbers in the setting, children benefit from sitting together with staff as a 'family'. With helpful support from staff, children learn to use their cutlery, demonstrate good manners and develop appropriate social skills.
- Senior leaders and staff understand and implement very successfully, the legislative requirements needed to provide high-quality early learning and childcare. Staff undertake a wide range of relevant professional learning and engage with support agencies very well to ensure their knowledge is current. Staff liaise with parents regularly to ensure children's changing needs are met timeously and highly effectively. They involve parents meaningfully to review their child's care plan and to highlight further support which may be required.

- Through careful observation, assessment and highly effective communication with parents and partner agencies, staff identify quickly when a child could benefit from additional targeted support. When required, specific individualised and detailed planning is implemented. These plans outline clear long- and short-term targets with clear strategies to help children make continuous progress. These very successful interventions, and the skilful interactions of staff are very highly impactful on the progress children make in their learning and development.
- Inclusive practice is embedded very well within the nursery. Senior leaders and staff are fully aware of the challenges and opportunities that island life can bring. They know individual children and their family context very well and work very meaningfully with a wide range of partners to ensure that no child or family misses out. Due to the remote location, face to face contact with agencies can present challenges. However, staff work tirelessly to ensure ongoing communication with partners. They seek advice regularly and use specialists' expertise to ensure the right level of support for children and families. As a result, children who require additional help with their learning and development are supported very well through highly effective partnership working. Recently, working in partnership with the school librarian, staff introduced a carefully considered 'peerie library' into the nursery for children and parents to borrow books and access information. This includes information on parenting, healthy lifestyles, specific community groups and services available to parents. This is an important addition to the nursery due to the remote context in which families live.
- Through curriculum planning, staff make sure children have experiences to learn about different festivals and celebrations that are important in their lives and others. Staff should continue to increase the range of resources and the use of digital technology to give children a greater awareness of diversity.

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 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.