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

Early learning and childcare inspection findings for the academic year 2024/25

A summary of findings

Number and type of inspections carried out

His Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) carried out 151 inspections of early learning and childcare settings (ELC) in 2024/25, of which:

- 64 were full model inspections
- 87 were short model inspections

Nine of the 151 settings required a further inspection.

The number and type of settings inspected during session 2024/2025:

- 99 local authority primary school nursery classes
- 43 settings from the private, voluntary and independent sector
- 9 local authority standalone settings.

HMI carried out 10 further inspections, from which only one setting required further engagement.

HM Inspectors carried out inspections in ELC settings across Scotland using quality indicators (QI) from How good is our early learning and childcare? (HGIOELC?). It draws on evidence from inspection visits, professional dialogue and pre-inspection questionnaires. This represents an approximate 5% sample of all ELC settings.

In September 2025, the Quality improvement framework for the early learning and childcare sectors was implemented. This replaced the HGIOELC? framework.

HMIE has a statutory duty to inspect and report on the quality of education and outcomes for learners in Scotland under the Education (Scotland) Act 2025. This sector level summary is intended to provide an accessible overview of strengths, areas for improvement and key patterns identified through inspection activity during the year.

Inspection findings

The inspection evidence from academic year 2024/25 shows that, overall, within the ELC sector, despite many challenges, there continue to be important strengths, with clear areas for improvement.

Across the sector, there is a strong commitment to improving outcomes for children and families. The wellbeing of children sits at the centre of the work of settings. The quality of learning environments continues to improve, with settings using more open-ended and real-life resources to support children's curiosity and levels of engagement.

The quality of interactions to support and extend children's learning is not consistently strong across the sector. Increasingly, staff are using national guidance to support their practice. However, further professional learning is required to deepen understanding of child development and early years pedagogy.

While in most settings children develop important skills for life and learning, settings need to record children's learning more effectively. The effective use of data to identify where further support or challenge may be required is not well embedded. There is still work to be done in many settings to continue to ensure appropriate levels of depth and challenge for children.

Across the sector, partnerships with parents and communities are positive and these contribute meaningfully to children's experiences.

Leadership of change

The majority of settings demonstrate a strong commitment to developing and sustaining a relevant and shared vision, values and aims. Where practice is strongest, the vision and values are co-created with families and children, refreshed regularly and embedded through interactions, learning spaces and experiences.

However, areas for improvement remain. Senior leaders and staff need to ensure stronger engagement of families and children to ensure that vision and values are demonstrated consistently, understood by all and embedded in practice.

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In a minority of settings where leadership is strong and consistent, strategic planning and change are well-paced and underpinned by robust quality assurance. However, the majority of settings would benefit from strong strategic leadership to strengthen approaches to monitoring and evaluating to improve further the quality of ELC. Where practice is most effective, leaders and staff make consistent use of national guidance, such as Realising the Ambition: Being Me, 2020 (RTA), self-evaluation frameworks and data, to inform practice and drive progress.

In most settings, staff engage with relevant professional learning that enhances and supports practice. Professional learning opportunities are generally well aligned to improvement priorities. In more than half of settings, staff would benefit from a deeper understanding of Curriculum for Excellence and RTA to strengthen the curriculum and pedagogy, and to ensure that improvements are evidence-based and sustained. Practice that is highly effective is characterised by strong pedagogical leadership and staff with leading roles that are purposeful and supported by robust action planning, leading to improvement.

Learning, teaching and assessment

Children under 3 years of age

In settings with children under 3, positive nurturing relationships support children to feel safe and secure and thrive in calm learning spaces. Staff encourage children's independence and confidence to explore and investigate a range of experiences that often support sensory development and curiosity. However, a few settings need to focus more on providing developmentally appropriate resources for younger children.

Increasingly, settings are planning responsively and sensitively to provide meaningful experiences for children. In a few settings, staff track children's progress using developmental milestones. In the best examples, this supports effectively, planning for children's development and interventions.

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Children aged 3 and over

A strength across almost all settings is the positive ethos, underpinned by strong nurturing relationships. These facilitate warm, safe and inclusive environments that promote wellbeing and engagement.

While many settings demonstrate commitment to children's rights, a majority are at an early stage of making rights explicit and embedding them into practice. In a significant majority of settings, staff demonstrate good understanding of individual children's needs, interests and developmental stages. In these settings, staff use this knowledge well to provide inviting learning experiences and spaces that reflect children's interests and enhances levels of engagement. In the best examples, children influence their learning spaces to extend their play and are supported well by staff to shape their learning.

Regular outdoor learning is offered in almost all settings. Most outdoor spaces and resources support children's curiosity, resilience and problem-solving well.

In a majority of settings, staff use open-ended questioning to support and extend children's learning effectively. However, the quality of interactions between staff and children is not consistently strong. Settings need to be able to demonstrate more that staff have a clearer understanding of child development and early years pedagogy. The majority of settings support learning and teaching through the effective use of digital technologies. However, this is an area where many settings require a wider range of digital resources.

Most settings capture children's learning experiences well through a range of methods, including learning journals, floorbooks and displays to make learning visible. Just under half of settings still need to improve the quality, consistency and focus of observations on the progression of skills.

In the majority of settings, there is an effective blend of responsive and intentional planning to support children's learning across the curriculum. However, the majority of settings still need to strengthen their tracking, monitoring and assessment of children's progress.

Across a high number of settings, moderation practices by senior leaders and staff are underdeveloped. Greater focus on moderation would provide opportunities for staff to discuss and develop a clearer understanding of children's progress.

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Learning and developmental pathways

In most settings, the curriculum is based firmly on play. In the most effective settings, staff implement flexible and progressive approaches that provide breadth across curricular areas through experiences both indoors and outdoors. These settings use progression frameworks well to support literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing.

In a minority of settings, staff do not yet have a deep enough understanding of curriculum design principles or progression in learning. This limits their ability to provide consistent depth, challenge and continuity across the early level.

In the majority of settings, children experience positive and flexible transitions when starting nursery. Most settings have in place well-planned and personalised arrangements that help children move confidently from nursery into primary school. In a minority of settings, there is evidence of joint planning and a shared understanding of play pedagogy being increasingly prioritised to ensure continuity and progression in learning.

Parental engagement

Most settings provide opportunities for children and parents to play and learn together in settings, at home and in the community. These settings communicate effectively with parents about their child's learning. This includes the use of online platforms to keep parents informed of children's learning experiences. Settings had gradually welcomed parents back into nursery playrooms since the Covid pandemic. However, they still need to increase opportunities for parents to be present within playrooms and involved more fully in the life of the setting.

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Ensuring wellbeing, equality and inclusion

In most settings, relationships are positive, respectful and supportive relationships. Staff prioritise children's wellbeing and model language and interactions that promote care and respect. As a result, children interact positively and show consideration for others.

In most settings, staff demonstrate effective approaches to promoting emotional wellbeing. Where practice is most effective, staff consistently model restorative approaches, enabling children to develop the awareness to regulate emotions and resolve minor conflicts calmly.

In most settings, ongoing professional learning strengthens the ability of staff to meet statutory requirements. In a few settings, statutory duties are not being fully met, particularly in relation to the administration of medication and the timely updating of personal care plans.

Senior leaders and staff in most settings have a clear understanding of children's individual circumstances, backgrounds and any barriers to learning and inclusion. In most settings, staff work well with families and partner agencies to overcome barriers to children's learning. In a majority of settings, staff develop and implement individual plans effectively, ensuring that support is tailored to children's changing needs. However, there remain important areas for improvement. While children who require additional support have plans in place, in many settings these are not always sufficiently detailed or reviewed regularly. Additionally, some settings need to develop more systematic approaches to tracking the impact of interventions in reducing barriers to learning.

Celebration of diversity is evident in just under half of settings, with children learning about equality, diversity and global citizenship. Staff in these settings incorporate relevant resources and celebratory experiences, to represent the world in which children live. In a majority of settings, inclusive experiences that celebrate diversity and deepen children's understanding of society need to be more explicitly embedded.

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Securing children's progress

Children under 3 years of age

Children make steady progress in their emotional, social and physical development. They benefit from the range of experiences that support them to explore their world using their senses. To support children's continuous progress, a number of settings need to ensure that the experiences they provide are appropriate for children's varying stages of development.

Children aged 3 and over

Across most settings, staff recognise, capture and celebrate children's individual achievements. In most settings, children are making good or better progress in their learning and development according to their developmental stage. In these settings, children are becoming increasingly confident, resilient and independent learners. However, in many settings, approaches to tracking children's learning and development do not provide a clear picture of children's progress over time. More systematic tracking, moderation and analysis of data are required to identify trends, address gaps in children's development outcomes and plan targeted interventions. The use of all data should be strengthened to build a clearer picture of each child's learning journey.

Across the sector, there is a strong commitment to equity and inclusion for all. In most settings, staff demonstrate a strong understanding of the socio-economic context of their communities and use this knowledge to create inclusive, nurturing environments where children and families feel valued and respected.

Staff in the majority of settings promote equity through practical supports such as lending libraries, pre-loved clothing and access to food initiatives, ensuring that no child misses out on experiences due to financial hardship.

Strong partnerships with external agencies further enhance outcomes for children who require additional support. However, planning and systems for tracking and analysing progress over time need to be strengthened to ensure that interventions are timely, targeted and evaluated for impact.

Further inspections

All 9 settings requiring a further inspection were graded as weak or unsatisfactory across the inspection framework: QI 1.3: Leadership of change, QI

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2.3: Learning teaching and assessment, QI 3.1: Ensuring wellbeing, equality and inclusion or QI 3.2: Securing children's progress.

Across all 9 settings, senior leaders and staff need to take urgent action to improve the quality of ELC. Senior leaders and staff need to improve approaches to planning, assessment and tracking children's progress and provide motivating and engaging experiences that enable children to make the best possible progress. This requires a strong focus on self-evaluation to effect change and sustained improvement to secure positive development outcomes for all children.

Evaluations for 2024/25

Quality indicator	Unsatisfactory	Weak	Satisfactory	Good	Very good	Excellent
1.3 – Leadership of change	2%	9%	28%	42%	19%	0%
2.3 – Learning, teaching and assessment *	1%	4%	23%	56%	17%	0%
3.1 – Wellbeing, inclusion and equality *	2%	5%	25%	39%	30%	0%
3.2 – Securing children's progress *	1%	3%	21%	59%	17%	0%

*These figures have been rounded up, resulting in a total of 101%.

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Five essential points

Positive, nurturing relationships support children's wellbeing

Across almost all settings, children benefit from warm, safe and inclusive environments where staff prioritise care, wellbeing and respectful relationships.

There is a strong commitment to improvement and partnership working

Staff and leaders are committed to improving outcomes for children and families through professional learning, reflective practice and engagement with parents, communities and partners.

Leadership, self-evaluation and quality assurance need to be more systematic

Stronger strategic and pedagogical leadership, supported by robust monitoring and evaluation, is required to drive sustained improvement.

Curriculum depth, progression and challenge require further development

Children benefit from play-based learning that provides meaningful experiences but curriculum design and progression are not yet consistently strong enough. Planning for children who require additional support also needs to be more firmly embedded.

Assessment, tracking, moderation and use of data need to improve

Children are becoming increasingly confident, resilient and independent learners, but more systematic approaches are needed to plan appropriate support and challenge. Improvement is needed in approaches to recording learning, tracking progress, moderating evidence, and use of data.

For our terms of quantity, please see this page on our website: Inspection terms of quantity | Inspection guidance | His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education in Scotland.

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