

Early learning and childcare (ELC) setting shared inspection report

St Mary's Episcopal Primary School Nursery Class

Stirling Council

31 March 2026

In February 2026, a team of inspectors from HMIE and the Care Inspectorate visited St Mary's Episcopal Primary School Nursery Class. During our visit, we talked to parents/carers and children and worked closely with the interim headteacher and staff.

Key inspection findings

- Staff create a calm, positive and nurturing ethos where children feel safe, valued and ready to learn. They design rich, engaging learning environments and demonstrate of early years' pedagogy.
- Children show curiosity and independence in their learning, exploring materials with interest and approaching new experiences with confidence. They are welcoming, friendly and keen to engage with adults and peers.
- The headteacher should establish clear and effective systems for identifying children who may need additional support with their learning or wellbeing. Staff should provide timely, targeted and regularly reviewed support that takes account of children's views, their families and relevant partners.
- Staff should strengthen their focus on developing children's early literacy and numeracy skills to ensure children appropriate progress in these essential areas. Planned learning should provide regular, purposeful opportunities for children to build and apply key skills, supported by clear next steps and effective monitoring.
- The headteacher and staff should develop more robust tracking and monitoring systems to better identify children's progress and ensure all children make the progress they are capable of over time.
- The provider and manager should review and make appropriate changes to staff deployment to ensure children are kept safe and supervised at all times.
- To keep children safe the provider must ensure that the premises are secure.
- Areas for development have been agreed with the ELC setting and the education authority that need to be addressed as a matter for urgency.

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
Children experience high quality spaces	Satisfactory/adequate
Learning, teaching and assessment	good
Nurturing, care and support	good
Children's progress	satisfactory/adequate

Summary of inspection findings

Key contextual Information

St Mary's Episcopal Nursery is situated within St Mary's Episcopal Primary School in the village of Dunblane, Stirling. The nursery provides early learning and childcare (ELC) for children living within a variety of communities including Dunblane and surrounding areas. Children can attend from the age of three until starting primary school. The setting is registered for 16 children to attend at any time. Currently there are twelve children on the roll. Children attend between 9 am and 3.30 pm Monday to Friday during school term time. There is one playroom with direct access to an enclosed outdoor area. Children visit a local woodland area, library and other local community areas frequently across their week. There are currently four children who share blended placements with other ELC providers.

An interim headteacher joined the school recently and has overall responsibility for the nursery. The nursery team consists of one Senior Early Childhood Educator (ECE) who oversees the day to day running of the service and keyworker responsibilities. She is supported by one Early Childhood Educator and one part time Early Childhood Educator support worker. (SWECE).

Leadership: Staff skills, knowledge, values and deployment

Children were cared for by a staff team who were compassionate, friendly, and responsive to children's needs. Staff had established positive relationships, with each other, children, and families. They communicated in a respectful way and spoke with enthusiasm and passion about their roles and responsibilities. This demonstrated a commitment to their work and created a warm and welcoming environment where children felt safe, loved and well cared for.

Staff felt valued and supported by their colleagues and senior education childhood educator. Due to being a small staff team, they informally checked in with one another regarding their wellbeing and practice. We asked leaders to consider how they could further support staff with professional development and personal discussions. For example, through regular supervision meetings.

Staff were knowledgeable, skilled, well trained, and spoke confidently about their pedagogy and shared values, which we observed in their practice. Staff explained how training and leadership opportunities had positively impacted on outcomes for children and families. Opportunities for reflective practice were provided through regular staff meetings. We encouraged leaders to strengthen this further by maintaining clear records of meetings and meaningful reflections on training. This

would support staff to better evaluate the impact of professional learning on practice and continuous improvement.

Staff new to the service were provided with an informative induction booklet that included links to relevant guidance. This approach supported them to feel welcome and confident in their practice. We encouraged leaders to use the national induction resource to extend and strengthen the induction process. This would provide unfamiliar staff with a more robust and reflective induction to support their understanding of their role and responsibilities. Additionally, it would enable leaders to better assess staff understanding of what is expected of them.

Children were cared for by familiar staff which provided them with continuity of care and support. Staff breaks were well planned which minimised disruption to children's routines and enabled staff to eat and be refreshed. The staff team were within ratio and worked hard together to support and supervise children to the best of their abilities for most of the time. However, the layout of the nursery and outdoor environment meant they could not always provide the level of supervision required to keep children safe. We discussed our concerns with the manager and the local authority and asked them to undertake a review of staffing within the service. There should be sufficient staff at all times to ensure children are accounted for and to keep them safe and secure (See area for improvement 1).

Area for improvement 1.

To ensure children are safe, supervised and receive high quality experiences at all times, the provider and manager should, as a minimum, review and make appropriate changes to staff deployment.

This is to ensure that care and support is consistent with the Health and Social Care Standards (HSCS) which state that: 'My needs are met by the right number of people' (HSCS 3.15).

Quality indicator: Children experience high quality spaces.

Children benefited from welcoming and inspiring environment. Staff had thoughtfully arranged areas of play with interesting ceiling mobiles, homely touches, real life experiences, and natural décor. A newly developed cosy area provided children with a comfortable, nurturing space to rest and relax, which supported their emotional needs. Children's successes were celebrated through positive praise and attractive wall displays. As a result, children felt valued, respected, and proud of their achievements which helped build their confidence and self-esteem. The warm ambience throughout the nursery contributed positively to children's sense of comfort and wellbeing.

Resources and experiences were well presented and easily accessible, offering children meaningful choice. Staff listened to children and responded appropriately to

their ideas and interests. They provided a range of open-ended and natural resources which encouraged children's exploration and enquiry skills. Free-flow access to an interesting outdoor garden enabled children to make independent choices about where they wished to play.

Staff were skilled, knowledgeable, and well trained in the theories and benefits of outdoor play and learning. They were enthusiastic and committed practitioners who engaged in ongoing professional learning related to forest approaches. This meant children benefited from an exciting garden space, outings within their local community, and regular visits to a nearby wooded area. Staff used effective questioning to support children to risk assess their play before and during forest activities. This helped them develop an understanding of how to keep themselves and others safe while exploring their natural environment. A child told us, 'We can't eat anything from the ground, and if we touch things we tell an adult and wash our hands.'

Some infection prevention and control measures were in place to minimise the spread of infection. For example, children were sensitively reminded to wash their hands, and the playroom was clean and well ventilated. Further consideration was needed in relation to the storage of spare clothes within the toilet and some children did not wash their hands in line with guidance when they were unaccompanied by an adult. Improvements in this area of practice would help avoid cross contamination (see area for improvement 1).

We acknowledged some systems were in place to keep children safe. However, we had significant concerns regarding the arrangements for security inside and outside of the premises which put children at risk of avoidable harm. Nursery children were able to access the school entrance door controls, stairs leading to an office and the playroom door was wedged open. This meant the door alarm was inactive and provided children with direct access to the school entrance where unfamiliar adults and school aged children were present. In addition, gates within the nursery garden and school playground were not secure. These issues posed a serious risk to children's safety. Although some improvements were made during the inspection, further action was required (see requirement 1). We directed the manager and staff to our Keeping Children Safe- Look, Think, Act (SIMOA) campaign and resources to help support them with improvements.

Requirement 1.

By 1 May 2026, the provider must ensure that children are kept safe and secure by implementing effective systems to prevent children leaving the service.

This should include but is not limited to:

- a) ensuring the premises, are secure at all times
- b) reviewing the security of gates leading into the school playground and nursery garden
- c) ensuring children cannot enter the school unaccompanied by an adult.

This is in order to comply with Regulation 4(1)(a) (Welfare of users) of the Social Care and Social Work and Improvement Scotland (Requirements for Care Services) Regulation 2011 (SSI 2011/2010). 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 5.19).

Area for improvement 1.

To keep children safe and healthy, the manager and staff should ensure that effective infection prevention and control practices and routines are in place and consistently practiced. This includes but is not limited to, ensuring that:

- a) children are supported so their handwashing routines are effective and following infection prevention and control guidance
- b) the toilet door is closed
- c) spare clothes are kept in lidded boxes
- d) staff are knowledgeable and competent about all aspects of infection prevention and control. 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 5.19).

Children play and learn: Learning, teaching and assessment

Staff ensure all children feel happy, secure and settled in the nursery. They build warm, trusted relationships and get to know each child well, responding sensitively to their individual needs and preferences. Staff's calm, nurturing manner supports most children to form positive attachments and contributes to the relaxed, welcoming atmosphere across the setting.

Children benefit from an indoor environment that is calm, organised and designed to promote curiosity, independence and creativity. Staff provide a broad range of open-ended resources to stimulate children's interest in learning across the curriculum. The garden provides an interesting and well-designed space that enables children to engage in a wide range of stimulating experiences. However, a few areas within the learning environment are not yet capturing children's interest or encouraging meaningful, sustained play. Staff should involve children more actively in shaping these spaces to ensure they are relevant, engaging and appropriately challenging. This should include opportunities to access digital technology to enhance exploration, support creativity and extend children's learning in meaningful ways.

Staff share a deepening understanding of early years pedagogy and use this to plan learning that is often purposeful. They listen carefully to children's views and encourage them to express their ideas with confidence. Staff use calm, attuned interactions and consistent role modelling to promote a respectful ethos. Children respond by showing kindness, cooperating well and engaging positively with one

another. Staff now need to ensure they consistently extend and challenge children's thinking in timely and meaningful ways. This should ensure all children experience rich interactions that deepen their understanding and help them build confidently on what they already know and can do.

The senior early childhood educator recently strengthened the setting's approach to documenting and planning for children's learning. Staff plan through a blend of child-initiated and adult-led approaches that take account of most children's ideas and needs. Using observations, they create personal learning stories and share these with families in each child's individual learning journal. This is having a positive impact on identifying the skills the majority of children are developing, their special interests and friendships. Building on this positive approach, staff should develop clear next steps to deepen children's learning and sustain their progress within and beyond the setting.

Senior leaders recognise that approaches to tracking, monitoring and evaluating children's progress need to be strengthened to ensure greater accuracy. Staff use local authority learning and development pathways to support assessment of children's play, interactions and learning. They are beginning to use this tool more effectively to reflect important aspects of children's progress. However, staff judgements are not always based on a broad range of evidence across different areas of learning. With the support of the headteacher, the senior early childhood educator should continue to review how they monitor and evaluate tracking of learning. Staff should use available data to increase expectations for children, including those who require additional support. This should help staff develop a clearer understanding of all children's developing skills and create a more accurate picture of their learning and development.

Children are supported to achieve: Nurturing care and support

Children benefited from caring and nurturing staff who treated them with warmth and kindness. Staff provided comfort and reassurance when required, which supported children to feel safe and secure. Trusting relationships between staff and children were evident, as children were observed engaging happily with staff during their play. Staff consistently valued children as individuals and offered reassurance, praise, and encouragement. This supported children to regulate their emotions effectively and promoted their confidence and wellbeing. As a result, children appeared happy, settled and enjoyed their time at nursery.

Building positive relationships was important to staff; they listened to children and families and valued their views. Staff warmly welcomed families into the service at the beginning and end of the day. These opportunities were used effectively to share information between home and nursery. As a result, children experienced positive attachments with staff, which supported smooth transitions and helped children to

settle quickly into their routines. Families spoke highly of the staff team, they told us, 'The staff are lovely, they are committed, interested and listen to the children', 'The staff are amazing, so attentive they know our child very well', 'It's an inclusive setting, our child has learned so much', and 'My child loves coming here'.

Each child had a personal plan in place with observations and next steps that supported learning and development. Staff demonstrated good knowledge of children's individual needs; however, key information and strategies of care and support were not always clearly recorded. Strengthening how valuable information is shared within the staff team would support them further with providing consistent care.

Mealtimes were calm, unhurried, and sociable experiences for children. The relaxed pace supported children to engage in conversation, build positive relationships, and develop social skills while eating without feeling rushed. Children's independence and responsibility were encouraged through preparing foods for snack, setting tables, self-serving, and pouring their own drinks. This promoted their confidence and supported the development of important lifelong skills. serving, and pouring their own drinks.

Children's safety was promoted as staff had a good understanding of their role in identifying and recording safeguarding concerns on children's wellbeing and welfare. We asked the manager to review reporting arrangements with staff to ensure they were all clear on who to direct concerns should the child protection officers be unavailable. No children required medication at the time of our visit. We reviewed medication paperwork and identified staff should record if medication had been administered to a child prior to them attending the service. This would support staff further to safely administer medication. We signposted our guidance 'Management of medication in daycare of children and childminding services' to assist them with this.

Children are supported to achieve: Children's progress

Staff create a supportive and nurturing learning environment that enables the majority of children to make satisfactory progress in line with their developmental stage. Children in the nursery are capable, curious learners. Most children confidently lead their play and explain their thoughts and ideas. Staff should now better identify and build on children's skills to ensure their sustained progress across all areas of learning and development. They should use assessment information, monitoring data and professional dialogue to better ensure every child can make effective progress in their learning and development.

Staff place a strong emphasis on supporting children's health and wellbeing, recognising its central role in helping children feel secure, settled and ready to learn.

They value play and uphold children's rights by ensuring regular outdoor experiences, sociable mealtimes and opportunities for children to rest. To build on this positive work, staff should continue to embed the wellbeing indicators throughout daily routines. This should lead to richer experiences that build children's confidence and provide more meaningful opportunities for them to lead their learning.

Children show confidence in their learning and engage well with a wide range of experiences. A few use rich vocabulary to share their ideas, and almost all show interest in stories, songs, early mark-making, problem-solving and number. However, all children need more planned opportunities to develop important early literacy and numeracy skills, including rhyme, phonological awareness and early number processing. To support this, staff should ensure planned learning experiences are better linked to children's next steps. They should continue to provide increased challenge for children through daily interactions, experiences and learning spaces. This should ensure children continue to extend their skills with confidence and make meaningful, better progress in early literacy and numeracy skill development.

Children's achievements are not yet consistently recognised, shared or used effectively to inform their next steps in learning. While staff record a few successes in learning journals and on wall displays, they do not yet gather or use significant information about children's achievements in a systematic way. As a result, almost all children have few opportunities to revisit their progress and talk about what they do well. Staff should continue to develop a more coherent approach to valuing and celebrating children's achievements. This will help children feel proud of their efforts and more actively engaged in their learning.

Staff provide a range of opportunities for children and families to come together throughout the year. This includes play sessions, shared cooking experiences and events that reflect the different cultural backgrounds of families. These occasions help children and their parents feel a stronger sense of connection to the setting and offer meaningful ways to share what matters to them.

Senior leaders should take timely steps to strengthen the monitoring of children's attendance. They should create regular opportunities to work with families to share how consistent attendance contributes to their child's learning, progress and wellbeing. Strengthening this partnership approach should help ensure children have consistent access to learning and the continuity needed to make 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 that need to be addressed as a matter for urgency.

- Following the inspection the education authority, working with the ELC setting, have taken forward areas for improvement in safeguarding which required urgent action. Inspectors have reviewed information relating to these areas for improvement. Inspectors are satisfied with the response taken by the education authority body and do not require any further information.

Outcome of inspection

Our inspection findings show that the setting needs time to make the necessary improvements. We will liaise with the provider and Stirling Council regarding the setting's capacity to improve. The Care Inspectorate will return to carry out a further inspection of the ELC setting. They will discuss with Stirling Council the details of this inspection.

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