

Summarised inspection findings

Smithton Primary School Nursery

The Highland Council

9 December 2025

Education Scotland Early Learning and Childcare inspections (pilot phase)

HM Inspectors gathered evidence to enable us to evaluate early learning and childcare setting's work using three quality indicators from [the Quality improvement framework for the early learning and childcare sectors](#). As this inspection is part of Education Scotland's inspection pilot phase using the Quality improvement framework for early learning and childcare sectors, these quality indicators have not been graded. This document provides our summarised findings.

Key contextual information

Smithton Primary School Nursery is registered for 84 children at any one time. It caters for children aged three to those not yet attending school. There are currently 68 children on the roll. Children can access their entitlement to funded early learning and childcare (ELC) by attending between 8.30 am until 3.00 pm, during term time. The depute headteacher of the school has delegated responsibility for the nursery, supported by a senior practitioner, nine practitioners and three support workers.

There have been significant changes to leadership over the last few years including local authority staff who support the setting. The staff team has remained more stable. The nursery is accommodated in two self-contained buildings as part of the campus of Smithton Primary School. There are three playrooms, cloakrooms and a small multi-purpose room, entrance halls and children's toilets. Both buildings access an extensive outdoor space, including a large, steep grass area. Children make use of the school dining hall for lunches.

Curriculum

This quality indicator highlights the importance of placing the needs, interests, rights and progress of children at the centre of curriculum design and implementation. [Curriculum](#) 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 [principles of curriculum design](#) 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

■ For most of the session, children have freedom to explore a wide range of learning experiences across the two buildings and the outdoor space. All staff are aware of the importance of play as fundamental to each child's learning. They respond to children's interests and encourage them to be independent and resilient. Senior leaders and staff need to think strategically about the purpose of the provision overall. This includes identifying the principles that underpin children's experiences, such as children's rights. Senior leaders and staff need to work together to create a more detailed rationale that takes full account of their unique context, including the 'campus model'. This rationale should make full use of local and national guidance.

■ Staff welcome and value all children. They should now consider how the uniqueness of each child can enhance the curriculum they are developing. They do not yet make use of their community to support the curriculum. The team link planned experiences to Curriculum for Excellence and gather information and observations for each child. However, as senior leaders have correctly identified, they do not yet have information that demonstrates how children's learning is progressing across the wider curriculum. Staff now need to gather information about

children's achievements and progress across more areas of the curriculum. This may help staff identify gaps in learning and ensure all children receive their entitlement to a broad and balanced curriculum.

- Working with school staff, staff have created a well-established programme of visits to support children settle as they transition into primary one. Across the year, children are familiar with spaces in the school, for example having lunch in the hall and using the playground, such as the den-building area. As a key part of transition, the team now need to improve continuity and how children progress in their learning experiences across early level. This needs to ensure children build on prior learning as they progress into and through their ELC experiences and move into primary school.
- The team recognise the need to develop their approach to working in partnership with their families. There are significant missed opportunities for building stronger relationships and parental involvement. These include routines and events, such as settling in processes, and stay and play sessions. Staff need to support families to contribute to learning opportunities for children, as well as engaging them in supporting their child's learning at home. The team also need to reach out to the wider community to make links and develop sustained partnerships to enrich the curriculum.
- Most children are confident in the learning environment and engage well with the learning opportunities available indoors and outside. They work well together, supported skilfully by the staff team. Most children are keen to share books and stories and enjoy mark-making. They engage with numbers and use mathematical language as they play. Staff are at the early stages of identifying meaningful opportunities for children to apply and develop skills and linking these to planned experiences. The team should develop their use of digital technologies to encourage creativity as well as build knowledge. There are numerous missed opportunities for children to apply and develop skills through routines, such as literacy and numeracy skills at snack time. The team should ensure that they are taking account of the learning needs of all children, including those who need further challenge, as they create their curriculum.

Learning, teaching and assessment

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 have nurturing, calm and caring relationships with children. As a result, children feel valued and secure in the setting. Almost all children engage well as they explore and experiment across the nursery spaces. They are becoming increasingly independent in their learning as they make choices about what and where they will play. Staff should ensure that there is consistency across the nursery spaces regarding routines and expectations. Children benefit from access to a varied outdoor area where they build gross motor skills as they run, climb, balance, roll and dig. Most are curious, articulate and interested in finding out about the world around them. Staff support children well to follow their own interests. Children explore open-ended resources, such as loose parts in the garden or sand and water indoors and out. Children now need increased challenge in their learning. Staff should consider how to provide further depth and problem-solving opportunities to support children to make the best possible progress.
- The team are sensitive to the needs of children, encouraging them to interact positively with staff and each other. Staff listen to children and encourage them to share their thoughts and feelings. Most staff use commentary and questioning skilfully to support children to extend their thinking as they play. The team are beginning to include children's views, for example, in developing the areas in the indoor environment. Most staff promote an understanding of wellbeing indicators effectively such as safe and responsible in meaningful contexts. They discuss the importance of tidying up. As a next step, staff should develop a consistent approach with children to promoting respect for the learning environment and resources.
- Senior leaders have correctly identified that they need to improve their approaches to gathering, recording and sharing information about each child's learning. Each child has a personal learning folder for individual observations focused on significant learning. Staff should now consider the frequency of the observations they record to ensure that they are reflecting accurately the progress each child is making. Children would benefit from more challenging learning targets linked more closely to observations of significant learning.

- Staff are developing their approaches to planning for children's learning. They are responsive to children's interests and using floorbooks to involve children in reflecting on what they know and what they would like to know. Staff should continue to develop their approach to intentional planning to provide a broader range of high-quality experiences for all children, linked to the development of skills. This should improve depth and breadth of learning experiences across the curriculum. Staff should also ensure that planning takes account of the needs of all children.
- The team are at the early stages of tracking children's progress. Staff use local authority developmental overviews to record the progress children make in key areas of their development. Senior leaders now need to ensure that there is consistency in the way staff complete these. Staff should also meet regularly to discuss and share the judgements they are making about children's progress. This should support them to ensure that the information gathered about children's progress is robust and accurate. This should also help them to improve the effectiveness of the learning targets they are setting. As this embeds, staff should be able to identify more readily, where individual children may benefit from specific support and challenge.

Wellbeing, inclusion and equality

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 have implemented meaningful strategies to help children understand and increasingly manage their emotions. This is having a positive impact with children and is reflected in the relationships they have with each other and staff. Almost all children play well together and are developing developmentally appropriate awareness of others and friendships. Children engage well in their play and staff support them effectively to negotiate social situations. Staff are responsive to children's interests and could now include children more fully in decisions that affect them. This should enhance children's sense of belonging and ownership of their nursery.
- Children have a developing awareness of the wellbeing indicators through a relevant 'wellbeing buddy' approach. They are able to identify the 'buddies' and are helpfully beginning to relate their actions and achievements to them. Staff should continue to support children to develop their understanding and use approaches consistently to ensure they impact positively on children's wellbeing and development. Staff need to develop a fuller awareness of children's rights and introduce this to children in meaningful ways.
- Staff provide all children with support to ensure they are included. As a result, almost all children engage in their chosen play, supported by skilled staff interactions. All children have learning targets, identified by staff. Staff now need to consider how they can most effectively support children to make progress towards meeting their targets. This includes working more closely with parents to identify and review what children need to learn, promoting stronger collaboration to support children's learning.
- Through their observations, senior leaders and staff are effective at identifying when children may have barriers to their learning. They now need to make increased use of the full range of information available to identify individual learning needs and how children can be supported.

Senior leaders and staff monitor children's attendance. They should continue to support families to maximise the benefits of children's entitlement to ELC. Staff have well-established partnerships with health visitors. This supports staff to take account of children's prior learning and existing needs and establish how they can support them to make progress. Staff should now plan for and deliver more targeted, individual support for identified individuals and groups of children to reduce barriers to learning. This support should be well-planned and regularly reviewed to ensure positive outcomes for children.

- Staff encourage all children to be part of the nursery. They treat children with kindness and fairness. Staff now need to work more closely with families to enrich children's experiences. By working more closely with families, staff could develop a fuller understanding of the context in which children live. This knowledge should be used to help children learn about diversity, beyond their immediate experience.

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