

Early learning and childcare (ELC) setting shared inspection report

Symington Early Years Centre

South Ayrshire Council

17 February 2026

In December 2025, a team of HM Inspectors of Education and the Care Inspectorate visited Symington Early Years Centre. During our visit, we talked to parents/carers and children and worked closely with the headteacher and staff.

Key inspection findings

- Staff demonstrated shared values, creating an inclusive, rights-respecting environment that supported continuous improvement.
- Staff empower children to be confident and independent individuals. As a result, children are highly motivated and make very good progress across all aspects of their learning and development.
- Staff provided warm, nurturing and responsive care that promoted emotional security, resilience, and positive relationships.
- Staff provide a wide range of exciting and purposeful learning experiences both indoors and outdoors. This helps children to develop a variety of skills, including numeracy skills, in a fun and imaginative way.

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	very good
Learning, teaching and assessment	very good
Nurturing, care and support	very good

Children's progress	very good
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Summary of inspection findings

Key contextual Information

Symington Early Years Centre is situated within Symington Primary School in the village of Symington, Kilmarnock. There is a large playroom with free-flow access to a well-resourced outdoor environment. All children access the school gym and lunch hall, playground and, if required, sensory room. Children access 1140 hours of early learning childcare (ELC) between 9 am and 3 pm, five days a week during term-time. Parents can purchase additional hours outwith these times. The setting is registered for a maximum of 60 children, at any one time, age three to those not yet attending primary school. There are currently 36 children on the roll.

The headteacher has overall strategic responsibility for the setting and is the named manager. The deputy headteacher has management responsibility for the setting. The senior early years practitioner has responsibility for the day-to-day management of the setting. There are seven early years practitioners, and a nursery support assistant. A local authority peripatetic nursery principal teacher supports the setting for one day per week.

Leadership: Staff skills, knowledge, values and deployment

Staff demonstrated strong professional competence and a clear understanding of child development. They created engaging indoor and outdoor provocations that sparked curiosity and built practical life skills. Staff worked collaboratively and maintained high expectations for every child. Planned and responsive learning experiences captured children's interests and deepened engagement. As a result, children showed improved confidence and achieved sustained progress in learning and development.

Reflective practice and the use of Quality Improvement Framework illustrations improved both indoor and outdoor environments. Staff redesigned the outdoor area to include spaces that promoted physical and sensory development after visiting other high-quality services and reviewing feedback. These changes encouraged exploration, including food preparation during play, and supported children's confidence and independence. Families actively participated in self-evaluation processes, strengthening partnerships and shared responsibility for improvement. To further increase children's voices in decision-making, staff could explore strategies such as child-led planning and visual feedback tools to ensure their views were consistently embedded in planning and improvement activities.

Senior leaders provided purposeful guidance and supervision which boosted staff morale and ensured clear roles and effective deployment. Changes in staffing were communicated clearly and managed effectively, maintaining continuity for children.

Staff deployment was well-organised and responsive to routines and children's individual needs. Staff welcomed children daily into their key group, creating a calm and positive start to the day and supporting strong relationships. They also maintained and replenished the play spaces they were responsible for, ensuring resources were inviting and ready for exploration. This created enriching experiences and an environment where children had fun, felt emotionally secure, and developed strong relationships. Staff demonstrated flexibility and creativity in adapting to children's interests, supporting high-quality learning experiences and sustained engagement.

Staff worked collaboratively within a shared leadership approach, maintaining high expectations for every child and promoting professional growth. Staff held responsibilities for outdoor learning, promoting children's rights, language development, and embedding SHANARRI wellbeing indicators throughout planning to ensure children's care, play, learning, and development consistently reflected inclusive wellbeing principles.

Staff meetings, professional development reviews, and individual learning goals strengthened practice and improved outcomes in wellbeing, language, and safety. Children developed word awareness during play and in small groups, which helped them understand key concepts such as 'safe'. This supported their ability to connect language to their rights and express their views confidently. While staff were reflective and demonstrated consistency in practice, written processes for evaluating the impact of professional learning could have been strengthened following training. Systematic use of peer observations and leadership evaluations could provide clearer evidence of impact, helping sustain improvements and inform future priorities.

Clear, well-communicated values fostered a positive, rights-respecting, and inclusive environment. This safeguarded children's welfare, strengthened relationships, and promoted a strong sense of belonging. Staff were registered with the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) and upheld professional standards. They were motivated, felt valued, and expressed pride in their work. Staff demonstrated strong professional competence and reflective practice, creating a culture of continuous improvement that benefits children and families.

Children play and learn: Learning, teaching and assessment

Staff have very respectful, caring and positive relationships with all children. Almost all children show kindness to each other as they play and learn together very well. Staff provide carefully considered, high-quality experiences alongside clear and consistent routines that help children become independent and confident learners. As a result of this very good practice, all children feel safe and valued.

Staff use the local community very effectively to provide high-quality, real-life experiences through 'Symington Saunters'. This helps staff to extend children's knowledge of the world around them, for example by observing seasonal changes. Children visit the local library to explore a wider range of books that relate to their current areas of interest.

Staff provide a wide range of exciting, challenging and open-ended experiences both indoors and outdoors. Almost all children remain highly motivated and engaged in learning for extended periods as they explore, experiment and develop their curiosity in a purposeful, calm learning environment. As a result, children are developing a wide range of skills that include problem solving and creativity.

Staff interact warmly and respond attentively to all children. They listen carefully, are attuned to individual needs and demonstrate a very good understanding of each child's learning styles. They regularly use the language of children's rights during play. This helps children feel valued and confident to learn. Almost all staff are highly skilled in their use of questioning and commentary to support and extend children's learning.

Staff make effective use of digital technology to support understanding of numeracy, for example, using the interactive whiteboard to create patterns. Staff should provide a wider range of digital technology experiences to further enhance and extend children's learning across the curriculum.

Staff observe closely, document and gather a wide range of children's significant learning and achievements. They use this robust information very well to form a holistic view of the child and make accurate judgements about children's progress. Staff share this valuable information with families on an online platform and through regular discussions.

Staff meet regularly to plan for children's learning. Planning is responsive, intentional and of a very high quality. Staff plan very effectively to help children learn about their rights and develop a wide range of skills. This aligns with the Curriculum for Excellence experiences and outcomes and national practice guidance. Staff plan and evaluate learning targets for each child effectively, display them in the setting and share them with both children and parents. This very effective practice empowers children to have high aspirations and be successful learners.

Staff involve families very well in learning through 'stay and play' sessions. This helps families understand better the skills and knowledge children develop in the setting. Staff should provide further opportunities for families to be involved in their child's learning and plan next steps together. This should ensure parents and staff have a greater shared understanding of children's progress.

Senior leaders provide effective support to staff to make accurate professional judgements to monitor and track children's progress in literacy, numeracy, and health and wellbeing. Staff use local authority tracking guidance and developmental

milestones very effectively to identify children who require additional support with their learning. They implement a wide range of universal and targeted support. For example, staff focus on numeracy concepts across all areas of the playroom. This has a very positive impact on children's progression in numeracy.

Children are supported to achieve: Nurturing care and support

Staff consistently provided warm, responsive care that promoted emotional wellbeing, secure attachments, and resilience. Children were treated respectfully, and staff responded promptly to individual needs, offering comfort and reassurance when needed. These approaches ensured children felt safe, valued, and confident, supporting positive relationships and a strong sense of belonging.

Initiatives such as the 'Colour Monster' check-in routine supported emotional expression and self-regulation, helping children develop strategies for managing feelings. Staff consistently applied rights-based language during routines and interactions to reinforce safety and respect. This approach built on children's growing awareness of concepts such as 'safe', ensuring that values were embedded in daily practice. Children were developing awareness of SIMOA, a safety framework that promoted risk awareness and independent decision-making through practical routines and discussions. Embedding this further through real-life scenarios and reflective conversations could strengthen children's ability to manage risks independently and build resilience.

Well-organised routines such as welcome time and lunchtime created predictability, strengthened relationships, and reduced anxiety during transitions. These routines were adapted to individual needs, ensuring calm and positive experiences for all children. Staff used observations and their knowledge of each child to tailor activities, promoting inclusion and maximising developmental progress. These personalised approaches ensured that every child experienced success and felt supported in their learning journey.

Personal plans were reviewed regularly with families and were guided by SHANARRI wellbeing indicators. These plans informed assessment and decision-making, supporting children's wellbeing, growth, and progress. Staff should continue to ensure that selected indicators accurately reflect observed outcomes to maintain clarity and consistency in planning. For children requiring additional support, detailed plans and chronologies were in place to enhance developmental progress and emotional wellbeing. These measures promoted inclusion, resilience, and positive outcomes.

The inclusive setting encouraged friendships and social interaction, contributing to a strong sense of community. Meals followed Setting the Table nutritional guidance, and fresh drinking water was available throughout the day. These practices promoted independence, healthy choices, and life skills, supporting overall wellbeing.

Consistent communication through handovers, newsletters, meetings, and events created a welcoming environment where families felt valued and informed. As a result, families were respected and involved, strengthening trust and partnership.

Overall, children and families benefited from nurturing care that promoted wellbeing, achievement, and resilience. Inclusive routines, personalised planning, and strong partnerships provided a secure foundation for lifelong learning and ensured that every child experienced high-quality care and support.

Children are supported to achieve: Children's progress

Children within the setting make very good progress across almost all aspects of their learning and development. As a result of very high-quality, fun learning experiences, almost all children are confident, motivated and independent learners.

Staff place a strong emphasis on health and wellbeing. Children confidently access the very high-quality, well equipped outdoor area. They regularly use the theatre and music areas to develop creativity and movement. Staff provide rich sensory experiences using herbs and fruit in the outdoor kitchen encouraging children's exploration and curiosity. Children develop their gross motor skills well as they balance and climb on equipment.

Children develop their early language and communication skills very well through a wide range of imaginary and real-life experiences. Almost all children independently access books and participate in 'rhyme of the fortnight' with their families to reinforce their speech and language development. Almost all children have a strong interest in writing for a purpose. For example, they use a wide range of mark making tools to create Christmas cards and labels in the environment as they demonstrate increasing detail and skill.

Staff embed early numeracy and mathematical opportunities very well across the curriculum. Children engage enthusiastically with a wide range of very high-quality learning experiences provided by highly skilled staff to support their numeracy progression. Almost all children confidently recognise and count numbers up to 10 and beyond. A few use numbers beyond 20 during play, proudly referring to themselves as 'Mathmagicians'. They demonstrate strong mathematical language skills. Children predict how far they can race their car using measuring tape and using 'gold treasure' to add and subtract coins.

Staff share children's achievements from home and within the setting on the 'proud wall.' Families share for example, how their child has learned to ride a bike or achieved success at gymnastics. Staff use praise meaningfully and recognise all children's strengths. Staff should continue to encourage families to share achievements from out with the setting to help them to build on children's prior learning. As planned, staff should track this information to inform planning and support children to make further progress.

All staff demonstrate a very good understanding of the cultural, socio-economic, and linguistic context in which children and families live. They collaborate closely with partners to gather robust evidence about children's progress and use it skilfully to identify children who require additional targeted support with learning. Staff plan and evaluate this support carefully and sensitively with families to ensure improved outcomes and sustained progress for children.

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. At the time of the inspection, there were no identified areas for development.

Outcome of inspection

We are confident that the ELC setting has the capacity to continue to improve and so we will make no more visits in connection with this inspection.

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