

Report of a Pilot Inspection
Ballymacward Pre-school Playgroup, Lisburn

November 2023



Contents

1. INTRODUCTION	1
A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION	1
B. VIEWS OF PARENTS AND STAFF	1
C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION.....	1
2. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS	2
3. MAIN REPORT	3
A. SETTING THE VISION	3
B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION	3
C. BUILDING EQUITY	4
D. EMBEDDING SUCCESS	4
E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING.....	5
F. CHILD PROTECTION	5
4. GOING FORWARD	5

1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Ballymacward Pre-school Playgroup is located near Stoneyford on the outskirts of Lisburn. The playgroup has been accommodated in a purpose-built modular building since 2010; a new outdoor area was developed in 2019 on land that was donated by the parish of Hannahstown. The children attending the playgroup come from the parish of Hannahstown and also from a wider rural and urban geographical area encompassing Stoneyford, Glenavy, Lisburn and Belfast. Most of the children attending the playgroup transfer to the primary school which is located in the same grounds as the playgroup. There are currently twelve children of pre-school age attending the part-time session, a minority of whom have special educational needs (SEN). An additional seven children who are not yet of pre-school age also attend the playgroup.

There is a welcoming, respectful and inclusive ethos in Ballymacward Pre-school Playgroup which is underpinned by a shared commitment to prioritise the health, safety and emotional wellbeing of all. The well-established and experienced team consists of a leader, deputy leader and two classroom assistants, one of whom is an SEN assistant. The management committee is also well-established and there has been a longstanding tradition of staff from the adjoining primary school assuming roles on the management committee. The early years specialist (EYS) from the Early Years Organisation (EYO) has been working with the staff for over ten years.

B. VIEWS OF PARENTS AND STAFF

One-half of the parents/carers (6) and all of the staff (4) responded to the online confidential questionnaires. A small number of parents and staff also included written comments, all of which were wholly positive and were shared by inspectors with the staff and management committee. In discussions with a small number of parents, they articulated their appreciation of the additional support the staff provide for their children, especially with settling in. They also reported that there is very good communication from the playgroup through the monthly newsletter, social media, regular parental meetings and the playgroup's digital application (app).

C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) worked alongside the playgroup to consider how well the playgroup:

- has identified and articulates its vision;
- prioritises actions to achieve the vision;
- overcomes the main challenges it faces;

- monitors and reviews progression to identify, celebrate and embed success; and
- grows and develops an inclusive community of learning.

2. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

- There is a shared vision and collegial commitment, at all levels, to provide a safe, stimulating and inclusive environment in which all children can access fully the pre-school curriculum.
- Almost all of the children are making good or very good progress in their learning across all areas of the pre-school curriculum.
- The development planning process is effective and appropriate priorities for improvement are identified, the rationale for which all staff can articulate. The targets set within the associated action plans, and the corresponding evidence of impact, are not always specific enough.
- Staff professional learning is linked strategically to the playgroup's development plan and is impacting positively on both the provision and on the outcomes for the children.
- Staff use the EYO's "Media Initiative for Children Respecting Difference" Programme effectively to support the children to develop an appreciation of difference and an understanding of their own and each other's behaviours, feelings and emotions.
- The cycle of planning, observation and assessment is wholly child-centred and underpinned by a well-embedded culture of self-evaluation and ongoing reflection by all staff.
- The playgroup has established strong and supportive relationships with: parents and families; the adjoining primary school; the SEN inclusion service from the EA; and their EYS, all of which are valued and impact positively on all aspects of the provision.
- The arrangements for child protection take full account of current child protection guidance.

Area for further consideration/action:

- to ensure all targets for improvement are specific and articulate more clearly the desired impact on the learners.

3. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

There is a shared vision and commitment by staff and management at all levels in Ballymacward Pre-school Playgroup to provide a safe, stimulating and inclusive environment in which all children can access fully the pre-school curriculum. This vision underpins all aspects of the life and work of the playgroup and informs the well-embedded cycle of continuous improvement.

The self-evaluation and development planning process is effective and appropriate priorities for improvement are identified annually in order to best meet the individual needs of each cohort of children. The collegial and committed staff reflect regularly on their practice and can articulate through discussions the impact of actions taken on the children's outcomes. The targets in the action plans however, and the recording of the corresponding evidence of impact, are not always clear enough and do not always reflect fully the improvements that have taken place.

The supportive and pro-active management committee is well informed about all aspects of the life and work of the playgroup. The longstanding tradition of members of staff from the adjoining primary school holding roles on the management committee provides continuity and stability of leadership and also supports the transition to Year one for those children who choose to go to the adjoining school after their pre-school year.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

The well-organised and well-resourced learning environments, both indoors and outdoors, provide interesting and appropriately challenging learning experiences across all areas of the pre-school curriculum and promote the development of the children's independence, curiosity and problem-solving.

The cycle of planning, observation and assessment is wholly child-centred and underpinned by a well-embedded culture of self-evaluation and ongoing reflection by all staff. There is appropriate planning in place that guides well the learning and teaching and enables progression in learning across all areas of the curriculum. All staff complete observations and evaluations of learning which are insightful and detailed and inform very well the individual planning for all children.

The staff engage naturally with the children at all times and model play effectively and intuitively. They use open-ended questions skilfully in their interactions which extend the children's thinking and understanding and support the further development of their communication skills.

The children's emotional health and wellbeing have been prioritised appropriately over recent years which is reflected in the planned programme of learning and staff professional learning, the caring and affirming ethos, and the attention given to physical activity, mindfulness, yoga and relaxation, and a healthy diet.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

The staff have created successfully an inclusive learning environment for all children. This is enabled by the well-embedded and consistent use of visual cues around the playroom that guide and support the children with transitions from one activity to another and with the daily routines and provide ease of access to a wide range of natural and commercial resources.

The children with SEN are supported very well through the consistent and pastoral approaches used by all staff, and through the regular and effective communication that is maintained with parents and external organisations. The personal learning plans are developed in close collaboration with parents and identify appropriate strategies and resources to support the children both at home and during their time in the playgroup.

Staff have been trained in the EYO's "Media Initiative for Children Respecting Difference" Programme and they use their knowledge of this programme very effectively, along with a range of stimulating interactive resources, to support the children in developing an appreciation of difference and an understanding of their own and each other's behaviours, feelings and emotions.

D. EMBEDDING SUCCESS

The staff know the children very well. They have high aspirations for the children and use successfully a range of appropriate strategies and interventions to support the children in their learning and ongoing development. They monitor effectively the progress each child is making and provide additional support or appropriate challenge or extension in learning, as required. They acknowledge and praise the children regularly and affirm their efforts through, for example, the implementation of a 'sticker system' to recognise and reward the children for their good effort and kind behaviour.

Almost all of the children are making good or very good progress in their learning across all areas of the pre-school curriculum. They settle well to play at the start of the day and after transitions, and can engage in purposeful, collaborative play for extended periods of time. Almost all of the children's fine motor skills are being developed well, as they manipulate with increasing dexterity the range of tools and resources around the room including, for example, using tongs to select their snack; filling, pouring and exploring the flow of sand using a range of utensils and containers; and completing a range of jigsaws and other table-top activities.

The children's representational artwork and early mark making are of a good standard. Their creations are valued and displayed with pride around the room, in the foyer and are also shared with parents via the digital app. Each child has their own 'busy book' which they take from their drawer to use for drawing and mark making whenever they wish to. A small number of children accessed these independently during the inspection and talked with pride about the work within their own books. These books also serve as a record of progression and achievement as the children learn and develop new skills through their pre-school year.

A significant number of the children engage in sustained collaborative play at the construction and role play areas. The authentic resources and skilful staff interactions at these areas encourage and enable high quality, creative and investigative play. The children also enjoy making, exploring and responding to music through, for example: songs and rhymes; using the radio and real instruments with meaningful purpose during role play; engaging in dance, relaxation practices and yoga; and exploring the musical stepping pads and other resources to make music outdoors.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

The staff meet successfully the needs of the children through prioritising strategically their own ongoing professional learning and through building partnerships with parents and families and with a range of other professionals and organisations, including: the adjoining primary school; their longstanding EYS; and the SEN inclusion service from the Education Authority (EA). Each of these partnerships are valued and impact positively on all aspects of the provision.

Through the well-established partnership with the primary school, the playgroup benefits not only from the stability this brings to the management committee but also from the sharing of resources, accommodation and expertise regarding a range of early years matters, including SEN. This partnership also benefits the children and their families directly owing to the availability of the breakfast club in the primary school, which a significant number of children from the playgroup attend, and the very comprehensive and pastoral arrangements for transition to Year one.

F. CHILD PROTECTION

At the time of the inspection, the evidence provided by the playgroup demonstrates that the arrangements for child protection take full account of the Department of Education's (DE) current guidance.

4. GOING FORWARD

Ballymacward Pre-school Playgroup, through its collegial, caring and professional staff, provides a safe, stimulating and inclusive environment in which all children can access fully the pre-school curriculum.

The inspection has highlighted an area for further action which will support the playgroup in achieving its vision. This includes: the need to ensure all targets for improvement are specific and articulate more clearly the desired impact on the learners.

An aspect of effective practice in this playgroup which should be shared more widely is the:

- extent to which the setting prioritises and embeds successfully health, wellbeing and keeping safe through their effective partnerships; well-considered staff professional learning; and wholly inclusive planned learning experiences.

The Education and Training Inspectorate

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