

Report of a Pilot Inspection
Hundred Acre Wood Playgroup

March 2024



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1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Hundred Acre Wood Playgroup is a private pre-school located on the Ballystockart Road outside Comber. It was established in 2000 and operates from a large purpose-built playroom on the grounds of a private dwelling. The children have access to a dedicated outdoor area which provides opportunities for the development of physical, imaginative and creative play. There are currently 26 children attending across the two part-time sessions, a small number of whom have been identified as having special educational needs (SEN). The children come from Ballygowan, Belfast, Castlereagh, and Newtownards and transfer to a range of primary schools.

The staff team consists of a leader, a deputy leader, three assistants and one SEN assistant. They avail of support from the proprietor and employ the services of an early years specialist (EYS).

B. VIEWS OF PARENTS AND STAFF

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) issued online confidential questionnaires to parents and staff in advance of the pilot inspection.

Twenty-three percent (6) of the parents responded to the questionnaire. The responses were wholly positive, with all of the parents reporting that their child is happy and is making progress. They also reported that they receive helpful information about the planned learning activities for their child. A small number of parents provided additional written comments. These highlighted the care exhibited by the staff and the creative and fun learning opportunities provided for their children. Inspectors also met with a small number of the parents. They praised the warm, welcoming atmosphere created by the staff and the helpful communication and advice they receive to extend their children's learning at home.

All of the pre-school staff responded to the questionnaire. Their responses were positive. They reported that they enjoy working at the pre-school and that their professional skills, understanding and knowledge are valued. They have opportunities to share their learning across the pre-school team.

C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION

The ETI worked alongside the pre-school to consider how well the pre-school:

- 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

- The staff have created a safe, welcoming learning environment which supports effectively the shared vision for the pre-school: that children are cared for, respected and encouraged to lead their learning.
- The development plan identifies appropriately key areas for improvement. More rigorous monitoring and evaluation of the associated actions is required to reflect better the improvements.
- Staff undertake regular observations of the children's learning. They need to use these more fully to inform future planning and monitor efficiently the children's progress.
- The interactions of the staff are of a high quality; appropriate language and approaches are used highly effectively to promote, sustain and extend the children's learning.
- The staff know their children very well and use a range of strategies effectively to support all children, including those with SEN.
- All of the children are making very good progress, they are confident and happy in the pre-school. Their personal, social and emotional skills are exceptional, and their behaviour is exemplary.
- At the time of the inspection, the evidence provided by the pre-school demonstrates that the arrangements for child protection align to the current statutory guidance.

Areas for further consideration:

- To develop further the processes of self-evaluation and action planning.
- To use more effectively the formal observations of children's learning to inform the short-term planning and monitor efficiently the children's progress.

3. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

The management, leadership and staff of Hundred Acre Wood Playgroup articulate a clear, shared vision for their children: that they are safe, cared for, respected, and encouraged to actively participate in and lead their learning. This vision permeates the daily life and work of the pre-school.

The development plan outlines appropriately the key areas for improvement and reflects the needs and interests of the children and the pre-school. The targets in the action plans and the recording of the evidence of impact need to be more specific, to chart better the improvements achieved in the pre-school as part of the self-evaluation process.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

The balanced use of the well organised and well-resourced indoor and extensive outdoor play areas provides learning opportunities which develop effectively the children's exploratory and investigative skills. The pre-school's natural woodland and garden area provides a vast range of learning opportunities across all areas of the pre-school curriculum. It supports very well the development of the children's appreciation for and understanding of their world around them. Staff have identified appropriately the need to enhance the use of real and authentic resources to extend further the children's learning experiences.

The long-, medium- and short-term planning promotes learning across the six areas of the pre-school curriculum and builds on and reflects appropriately the children's interests and needs. Staff operate a keyworker system and make detailed, regular observations of the learning. They now need to use the observations to inform more fully future planning, to ensure the children's progression can be monitored and tracked more effectively.

The caring and pastoral approach of the staff has created a welcome, safe learning environment for the children. The staff model, scaffold and extend the children's learning in a highly effective manner. Their use of open-ended questioning, encouragement, praise and active participation in the children's learning promotes successfully the children's high levels of independence, and positive attitude to and confidence in leading their own learning.

The health and emotional wellbeing of the children is supported very well by staff with an appropriate focus on: responding to the developmental needs of each child; reflecting on the environment from the perspective of the child; and establishing predictable routines. The positive interactions of staff with the children ensure the children can learn at their own pace.

There is a range of appropriate policies in place to promote safeguarding within the pre-school. The very well-established routines support effectively the independence and safety of the children.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

The ethos of Hundred Acre Wood to provide a "home from home" for the children is achieved through detailed knowledge of each child and the strong, well-established lines of communication with parents. The programme of induction is personalised and adapted to meet the needs of each child. The children show high levels of respect towards each other, engage enthusiastically in their play, share, turn take and understand their own needs and respect those of others. The behaviour of the children is exemplary. The children with SEN are supported very well; staff recognise their needs and use a range of approaches to promote their learning.

D. EMBEDDING SUCCESS

All the children are making very good progress across all areas of the pre-school curriculum. The approaches and strategies the staff employ to support the children's transition to and during their pre-school experience are very effective. As a result, the personal, social and emotional skills of all the children are exceptional. The children lead their learning and engage in sustained, concentrated play. They share resources freely during their collaborative play and where necessary negotiate and self-manage the use of play equipment, through for example, the utilisation of a sand timer. Almost all of the children engage effectively in age-appropriate play with their peers.

All of the children observed listen attentively and engage enthusiastically in the storytelling and music sessions. Their language and communication skills are developing well, and many children freely choose books and mark making activities during their play. Through their interactions and the use of rhymes and songs, the staff promote effectively the development of early mathematical language which the children use naturally in the context of their play.

The children's representational artwork and early mark making are of a very good standard. Staff annotate with detail and display their creations in the playroom and share and celebrate the work with parents via the digital application (app). All of the children have well-developed fine and gross motor skills. They use a range of equipment, such as scissors, paintbrushes, mark making tools and tongs with confidence. The staff provide a wide range of outdoor play equipment and promote successfully safe play. The children engage enthusiastically in the range of energetic physical activities which support well the development of their balance, control and coordination.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

The pre-school has developed effective communication with parents; the digital app is used to inform and involve parents regularly in their child's learning and to celebrate their achievements. The use of a monthly newsletter informs parents of important events, celebrations and ideas for developing the theme of the month at home with their children.

Parents engage actively in the life and work of the pre-school through fundraising events, stay and play activities, the carol service and graduation events. Parents and grandparents are supporting the pre-school with its priority area for development, to enhance and develop the use of authentic materials. They have been actively involved in collecting and building a bank of these resources to support the children's play experiences. Staff share photographs of the children using these resources to demonstrate how they value the involvement of the pre-school community.

Staff are supported well by the management to extend their professional learning to meet the needs of the children. A more strategic approach to their professional development, aligned with the current priorities of the pre-school, will enhance further the achievement of their vision.

F. CHILD PROTECTION

At the time of the inspection, the evidence provided by the pre-school demonstrates that the arrangements for child protection align to the current statutory guidance.

4. GOING FORWARD

The vision for Hundred Acre Wood is well-embedded and is reflected in the caring learning environment where all children are supported to develop confidence, independence and self-management skills. The skilful interactions between the staff and the children impact positively on the learning. The management and staff value and build upon the children's early childhood experiences and promote respect and equal opportunities for all.

ETI will monitor the progress of Hundred Acre Wood in addressing the areas for further consideration as laid out in this report.

Inspectors identified aspects of highly effective practice from which others may learn. The aspects of practice which should be shared more widely include:

- the strategies employed by staff to develop the children's high levels of independence and their social engagement; and
- the opportunities provided to lead their learning.

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