

Report of a Pilot Inspection
Little Acorns Playgroup, Coleraine

March 2024



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1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Little Acorns Playgroup is voluntary playgroup located in the grounds of Castleroe Primary School in Coleraine, County Londonderry. The playgroup has its own premises in a mobile building with a separate entrance and small outdoor area. The playgroup children also have access to the primary school's forest area. The staff use the forest area regularly to promote the children's curiosity and investigative skills, as well as to develop their respect for their natural environment.

There are 16 pre-school children attending the part-time session who come from the town and surrounding rural area. In addition, the playgroup staff facilitate an early morning drop-off for a small number of children whose parents require the service. One-quarter of the children are on the Special Education Needs (SEN) register and are receiving additional support; a small number of these children are awaiting the completion of the statementing process. Almost all of children transfer to the adjoining primary school, with a very small number transferring to the three other primary schools in the town.

The leader is supported by a deputy leader and a recently appointed assistant. The playgroup has recently employed an early years specialist (EYS) to provide support and training opportunities.

B. VIEWS OF PARENTS, CARERS AND STAFF

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

Just under one-third of parents/carers responded to the online confidential questionnaires, with a small number including written comments which were very positive about the work of the staff. In the written comments, the parents/carers expressed their appreciation of the care given by the staff, and the individual learning opportunities provided for their child. They reported that they have seen significant improvement in their child's learning, their child feels safe in the playgroup, and they would recommend the playgroup to other parents/carers.

In discussions with a small number of parents, they reported that the staff are very friendly and supportive to their child and themselves. The parents also spoke about how their children enjoy the forest area and engaging in messy play. They appreciated how the staff ensure they are happy and are supporting them to be ready for the transition to primary school.

Almost all of the staff responded to the questionnaire; their responses were all very positive.

C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION

The 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

- The staff are committed to a shared vision of fostering a caring and safe environment in which the children's interests are valued, their individual achievements are celebrated, and they all develop confidence, independence and social skills in preparation for going to primary school.
- Almost all of the children observed display good levels of independence during all play experiences and have very good behaviour. They access books for reference during their play, using these to scaffold and develop further their learning.
- The staff are self-reflective and have a collaborative approach to self-evaluation and planning. They monitor and evaluate regularly the children's progression across all areas of the pre-school curriculum. There is a shared commitment to continue to improve the provision and outcomes for the children. The action plans need to improve and guide more effectively the process of improvement.
- The indoor and outdoor learning environments, including the forest area, provide good opportunities for the children to engage in child-led, investigative and creative play across all areas of the pre-school curriculum.
- The staff have detailed long-, medium- and short-term planning that is informed by the children's interests and underpinned by an effective observation cycle to improve the outcomes for all of the children. They use effective, open-ended questioning consistently to develop, extend and successfully meet the individual needs of almost all children.
- The staff have effective relationships and communication with parents/carers and have fostered a strong partnership with the adjoining primary school. Following recent employment of an EYS, the staff intend to develop further links with other playgroups and avail of further training opportunities.

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

Areas for further consideration:

- To review and revise the action plans to inform and guide more effectively the actions to bring about improvement in the best interests of the children.
- To engage in additional training opportunities facilitated by the EYS, to improve further the provision and outcomes for the children.

3. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

The staff and management have engaged in effective consultation with parents to establish the shared vision for the playgroup: *'to provide a welcoming, attractive and stimulating environment which supports and celebrates the individual achievement of each child and supports their development and learning so they are prepared for primary school'*. The staff are focused on realising the vision through the development of the children's social skills and independence, and their learning across the six areas of the pre-school curriculum. They are committed also to realising the vision through the effective promotion of positive behaviour approaches.

Through a collaborative approach to the self-evaluation and planning, the staff are supporting and celebrating the individuals needs and achievements of the children. The staff can articulate clearly the positive impact of the actions taken to improve further the provision and outcomes for the children.

The staff have engaged in a range of appropriate professional learning to develop their knowledge and skills: Makaton, and the Forest Schools and loose parts play initiatives. Their professional learning is having a positive impact on the development of an inclusive and creative learning.

The playgroup has very recently employed an EYS to support the staff in their work, including the development of a more strategic and robust development planning process going forward. The staff welcome the planned opportunities to participate in more professional learning through cluster training with the EYS.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

The ethos of the playgroup is to provide the children with a welcoming, attractive and stimulating environment which supports the children's learning and development while celebrating the individual achievements of each child. Positive language is modelled consistently by staff which encourages the children to be respectful of each other's feelings and promotes a respectful and caring atmosphere in the playgroup.

The attractive and stimulating indoor and outdoor learning environments have a wide range of natural and authentic materials which provide appropriate opportunities for staff to extend the children's creativity and curiosity. These learning environments are informed well by the children's interests and feedback from the children during play activities. This enables the children to lead their own learning and build their self-esteem and confidence. The playgroup regularly uses the adjoining primary school's forest area to provide the children with the opportunity to engage in a range of sensory and hands-on experiences in the natural environment.

The staff are implementing an effective cycle of planning, observation and assessment. They have a good understanding of the needs of all of the children through regularly monitoring and evaluating the children's learning and progression using a digital application (App). Their use of effective open-ended questioning encourages the children to confidently extend their play and share their thinking and problem-solving with their peers and other adults during play experiences.

Health and wellbeing of the staff and children has been identified appropriately as a focus on the development plan. Through their own personal development, the staff are providing a range of wellbeing activities including yoga, mindfulness, breathing techniques to develop the children's self-regulation and wellbeing. Healthy lifestyles are encouraged through a healthy snack, and promotion of outdoor play in a natural environment. These outdoor activities are planned to develop a sense of calmness in the children, along with additional opportunities to promote energetic physical play.

A culture of keeping safe is promoted regularly by the staff during learning activities. The children are encouraged to make good choices, for example, when building in the construction area with each other. They are also aware and can articulate how to keep safe in the outdoor environment, especially within the forest area. The staff need to review a small number of safeguarding policies, namely the intimate care policy and antibullying policy, to reflect better the effective practice of the staff.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

The positive and caring approach by staff provides the children with an environment in which they feel confident and valued. Through their regular evaluations of the children's learning, the staff know the children very well and are responsive to their individual needs; they support the children using a range of effective strategies. The staff celebrate and praise the children for their individual achievements which builds their self-esteem.

The staff have appropriate individual education plans in place for those children identified on the SEN register. They provide these children with regular adult one-to-one support and employ strategies which result in almost all of the children make progress in their learning. These strategies could be developed further to support better a small number of children with more complex needs. The staff have engaged with external support provided by allied health professionals for the children with SEN, including education psychology, social services and the health visitor.

D. EMBEDDING SUCCESS

Almost all of the children observed display a good level of concentration and focus at their chosen area of interest for a sustained period of time. The children are familiar with routines and transitions and display very good behaviour throughout the session. They understand the importance of good listening and turn-taking and show respect and care for their peers. Staff are skilful at noticing, acknowledging and praising this behaviour.

The staff support skilfully and extend the children's learning by providing authentic resources and a good range of books. The children are developing well their language and communication skills in play areas, for example, through role-play in the garden centre, water and sand play, and at the construction area. A majority of children show a good interest in books and independently access them, share them with their peers and on regular occasions ask an adult to read them a story. The children were very attentive during story time and were able to retell and join in with repetitive lines in the story.

Almost all of the children are developing very good fine motor skills. They were independently creating detailed early representational pictures using a range of resources. For example, they use paints, pens, brushes and flowers for printing, and they proudly share their achievements with the staff. The children's work is celebrated through attractive displays in the room and individual portfolios and the parents report the children like to share their work with them when they attend events throughout the year in the playgroup.

The staff model consistently a range of early mathematical language during almost all play activities. Consequently, the children naturally use early mathematical language such as positional language, counting, shape recognition, measuring and comparison during their play experiences.

The children enjoy and embrace the learning opportunities provided in the forest area and participate in planting seeds, foraging within the natural environment and engaging in free play exploring the woodland.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

The playgroup staff have established effective relationships with the parents/carers. The staff update them regularly about the children's learning and achievements through formal meetings, photographs, social media, the monthly newsletter, learning packs and the lending library. Parents/carers are informed of planned activities, prior to a holiday time so the children are able to make a smoother transition back to playgroup following their absence. They are also invited to participate in seasonal celebrations including Big Bedtime Read evening, World Book Day and World Smile Day.

The staff are developing well the children's skills and preparing them for transition to Year 1. They have promoted very good links with the adjoining primary school and Year 1 pupils participate in monthly play dates with the playgroup children which develops their confidence and promotes their social skills. In addition, Year 7 pupils participate in walks with the playgroup children in the local community; the intent is to alleviate anxiety and aid smooth transitions for the playgroup children to their chosen primary school. The local community emergency services such as the ambulance and police are invited in to talk with the children and local businesses have supported the playgroup during the various fundraising events.

F. CHILD PROTECTION

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

4. GOING FORWARD

Little Acorns Playgroup provides the children with a learning environment in which their interests are valued, and they feel safe and confident. All of the staff promote positive language and behaviour which creates an inclusive approach to learning for all of the children, and supports well the shared vision of the playgroup, to recognise and celebrate the individual achievements of each child.

The ETI will monitor the progress of Little Acorns Playgroup 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 highly effective links with the adjoining primary school promotes a strong foundation for the children's learning and prepares them well for transition to Year 1.

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