

Report of a Pilot Inspection  
Little Friends Pre-school, Banbridge

February 2024



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# **1. INTRODUCTION**

## **A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Little Friends Pre-school is part of a privately owned Little Friends Private Day Care facility, located on the outskirts of Banbridge. Established in 2008, the pre-school is situated in a secure, spacious, well maintained outdoor area adjacent to the associated day care facility. A large, all-weather, outdoor play area which is accessed directly from the pre-school building provides space for the children to take part in energetic and explorative play.

The 46 pre-school children attending the two part-time sessions come from the local and wider Banbridge area. The children transition to a number of primary schools in the Banbridge area.

The pre-school team is well-established and includes a leader, deputy leader, five classroom assistants and one Special Educational Needs (SEN) assistant. The management team is led by the proprietor of Little Friends Private Day Care and supported by the day care manager who is also the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) for the pre-school. An early years specialist (EYS) has recently started to work with the staff.

## **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.

Fifty-seven percent (26) of the parents responded to the questionnaire. All of these parents indicated that the staff are welcoming, caring and provide a safe and happy environment for the children. Additionally, a small number of the parents included additional written comments which were very positive.

A small number of parents also met with inspectors during the inspection. They reported that their children were very happy and making connections between learning in the pre-school and at home. The family atmosphere of the pre-school, the excellent levels of communication and the opportunities to be involved in the work of the pre-school were also highly praised by these parents.

All of the staff responded to the questionnaire and almost all of them provided written comments; their responses were wholly positive. They commented on the very strong team ethos, the shared commitment to the vision and the well-established, supportive relationships between the staff and management.

## **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 pre-school staff and management demonstrate consistently a high level of commitment to achieving their shared vision that “*every child will meet their full potential*”. This child-centred vision is achieved through the high-quality, consistent and impactful actions of the staff across all areas of work in the pre-school.
- A highly effective cycle and process of self-evaluation is in place. This is informed in detail by the insightful and reflective pre-school team and developed in consultation with management, parents and the wider community.
- The process of planning, observation and assessment is detailed, informed well by the children’s interests and tracks clearly the progress of each child across all areas of the pre-school curriculum.
- The learning environment is richly resourced, imaginative and supports effectively the holistic development of all children. Exploration, creativity and curiosity is encouraged across all areas of the pre-school curriculum. The development of early mathematical language is a key strength through the provision of rich and imaginative open-ended learning opportunities.
- Almost all of the children observed are making very good progress in their learning. The staff use additional strategies appropriately to meet the needs of the children with SEN. These strategies need to be implemented consistently and developed further to support children with more complex needs.
- There are excellent partnerships which are demonstrated through the pre-school’s open-door culture and regular engagement with parents and the wider community.
- 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.

### Area for consideration:

- To implement consistently and develop further the additional strategies currently used in the pre-school to support children with more complex needs.

### **3. MAIN REPORT**

#### **A. SETTING THE VISION**

The pre-school staff and management of Little Friends Pre-school are highly committed to their philosophy that “*each child is unique and special with individual interests and abilities*”. Their shared vision is that every child should be provided with the opportunities to fulfil their true and full potential and thrive in a safe, nurturing, inspiring and child-centred environment. The collaborative process of self-evaluation and planning within the pre-school is highly effective and the identified key priorities are well considered and in line with the pre-school vision. For example, the staff have appropriately recognised the need to develop further the digital skills of the children and this is a priority area in the development plan.

The pre-school management team are highly supportive of the staff; they have a comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the priorities on the development plan and associated actions. The management team provide strategic and practical support to the staff, including dedicated non-contact time, which is effectively empowering the pre-school team and fostering a collaborative work environment. The pre-school staff are well-established and have developed a strong culture of teamwork and support. The early years specialist has started to provide good support to the pre-school.

#### **B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION**

The pre-school staff have a comprehensive understanding of all the children, their ability and potential. They know the children well and use the children’s feedback and interests to develop and extend their learning. The staff’s skilful, adaptive approach to planning enables every child to make suitable progress across all areas of the pre-school curriculum. The meticulous and robust cycle of short-, medium- and long-term planning is highly effective in guiding the work of all of the staff. Their strategic process of observation and assessment informs effectively future planning and leads to appropriate outcomes for almost all of all the children. Their pastoral approach enhances further all learning opportunities.

The indoor and outdoor learning environments are creatively organised, designed and resourced with a wide range of authentic and natural materials. These learning areas are successful in providing open-ended opportunities for the development of wonder and curiosity through immersive investigative play. The pre-school staff are consistently skilful in their scaffolding and support of the children’s play. The fine motor skills of almost all of the children are very well developed, and the staff plan suitable extension activities to challenge the children such as decreasing the size of beads for use with the tongs during tabletop activities.

The promotion of the children’s health and wellbeing and keeping safe is highly effective. Healthy eating is promoted very well within the pre-school through snack time and the opportunity to visit a local gym and take part in exercise sessions to embed the importance of a healthy lifestyle. The children engage in energetic play outside and almost all are developing very good gross motor skills. The staff and management prioritise the safety and wellbeing of the children and the risk assessments in place are robust, detailed and appropriate.



## **C. BUILDING EQUITY**

The vision of the pre-school is exemplified in the inclusive environment that the staff provide to support appropriately the individual and diverse needs of all of the children.

The pre-school staff have developed well their understanding of SEN through professional learning and support from other external providers, such as the education psychologist and other allied health professionals. The staff are implementing a range of adaptive strategies, which are shared with parents, to support those children on the SEN register. These strategies could be developed further to support children with more complex social and emotional needs. The targets set for the children on the SEN register are appropriate and are regularly reviewed to detail the progress and achievement of the children.

## **D. EMBEDDING SUCCESS**

Almost all of the children observed are very confident and follow effortlessly the established daily routines and transitions; a majority of the children are engaging in sustained, associative play. They explore eagerly a variety of engaging resources such as real food, projectors, torches and paints which foster curiosity and creativity. The personal, social and emotional skills of the children are very well developed; they show respect towards the resources and their environment and take great pride in their work which is proudly displayed in all areas of the pre-school.

Opportunities for language development are planned for and integrated successfully across all areas of the pre-school curriculum. Books are displayed in all areas of the indoor and outdoor learning environment and the children enjoy listening to the theme-related story during circle time. All families participate in the lending library and the opinions of the children and their preferences are considered by staff in future choices of stories for the children.

The promotion of mathematical language by all staff is skilful and consistent and is implemented effectively in all areas of the indoor and outdoor learning environment. Almost all the children can successfully use the number system in place for playing in different areas and there is a rich mathematical vocabulary in use in relation to the theme of planets and spaceships. The children use symbols and numbers to organise their outdoor equipment, use pretend money in the shop and write orders and collect money in the mud kitchen restaurant.

The loose parts provision is of good quality and the children play for sustained periods of time in the “outer space” area exploring and using their imagination. They role play as astronauts, pilots and create exciting adventures among the planets and stars in their imaginative area. Almost all the children are confident and eager to engage in conversation with their peers and adults within the room.

## **E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING**

The management and staff value their close partnerships with parents which is demonstrated through the pre-school open-door culture and regular engagement. The very effective methods of communication include the use of a bespoke digital application which is used regularly to interact with parents. The staff provide a monthly newsletter to parents and use social media pages and their website to share

the successes of the children in the pre-school with the wider community. Parents are encouraged to attend circle time sessions, read stories to the children and showcase their professions such as the optician and farmer visits. Other activities such as the Easter walk, Big Bedtime Read and World Book Day are used to promote further the parental engagement and increase parents' knowledge of the pre-school curriculum.

The staff welcome the effective communication and support provided by the management and proprietor and feel valued in their role. They have established good links with wider community agencies such as Sure Start and the local library which has impacted positively on the quality of the provision and the outcomes of the children. There are good links with the various primary schools that the children transition to, with opportunities for them to meet the primary school staff and take part in activities. The parents who inspectors met with feel this is beneficial in preparing their children to move on from the pre-school.

The pre-school has developed an intergenerational programme with a local care home for adults with dementia. This has had a positive impact on the social and emotional development of the children, while also providing companionship for the adults. Through visits and planned activities, the children and the elderly residents engage in shared experiences such as baking, planting and art activities, fostering empathy, understanding and a sense of community.

## **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**

Little Friends Pre-school demonstrates a child-centred vision which is achieved through the work and dedication of the pre-school staff and management and is effectively meeting the needs of all of the children. Through the provision of high-quality learning experiences, underpinned by a strong self-evaluation process and detailed planning, all of the children are making very good progress.

ETI will continue to work with Little Friends Pre-school, including to share examples of highly effective practice from which others may learn. The aspects of practice which should be shared more widely include:

- the collaborative approach to self-evaluation and planning; and
- the promotion of mathematical language across all areas of the pre-school curriculum.

Little Friends Pre-school is well placed to take forward the area for consideration detailed in this report.

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