

Report of a Pilot Inspection
Mount Oriel Playgroup, Belfast

March 2024



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1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Mount Oriel Playgroup is a private pre-school playgroup located in south Belfast. The playgroup operates from a 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. The 12 children of pre-school age attending the part-time session all come from the immediate area and almost all of the children transfer to the local primary schools.

The proprietor took ownership of the playgroup in September 2022. In the absence of a functioning management committee, the proprietor has assumed a range of responsibilities including playgroup leader, designated safeguarding officer and playgroup manager. The two assistants were appointed in 2023. There is currently no early years specialist supporting the playgroup.

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-eight percent (7) of the parents responded to the questionnaire, with a small number providing additional written comments. The responses were mainly positive, with all parents reporting that their child is happy and is making progress. Inspectors also met with a small number of parents who indicated their child had made friends and welcomed the support provided by the staff who they find friendly and approachable.

A small number of the staff responded to the confidential questionnaire; the responses were 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 team have a shared vision for the playgroup to provide a welcoming, inclusive environment in which the children can develop holistically and build a firm foundation for their learning. Further development of staff knowledge and understanding of the pre-school curriculum is required to support the realisation of this shared vision.
- The children observed are happy, settled and engage well in the play opportunities presented. They have good levels of independence and engage in sustained periods of concentrated play.
- The staff interactions with the children are mostly effective. When language is modelled well, and open questioning is used effectively, the children are more engaged and their thinking skills are being developed.
- The current process of self-evaluation and action planning is underdeveloped.
- There are no co-ordinated, formal arrangements for planning, observation and assessment to allow consistent monitoring and tracking of the children's progress.
- Parents are encouraged to be actively involved in their child's learning, for example, through volunteering for trips, visits to the pre-school setting and engaging in the 'book bag' programme.
- At the time of the inspection, the playgroup's arrangements for child protection do not align sufficiently to the current statutory guidance.

Areas for action:

- To complete outstanding child protection training for all staff members, as a priority, including the designated child protection officer.
- To update the child protection policy in line with the current statutory guidance.
- To update a number of safeguarding policies.
- To develop a strategic and robust process of self-evaluation and action planning to support the achievement of the vision.
- To record observations and assessment of the children's learning across all areas of the pre-school curriculum and use these to effectively inform the planning and ensure the the needs and interests of all children are met.

3. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

The staff team have a shared vision for the playgroup: to provide a welcoming, inclusive environment in which the children can develop holistically and build a firm foundation for their learning.

Staff members are enthusiastic and willing to embrace change, however the identification of the key priorities necessary to effect improvement in the playgroup's provision is at an early stage. While there is a current development plan, the playgroup does not have sufficient monitoring and evaluation procedures in place to inform effectively the action planning and improvement processes.

A management committee does not operate in the setting. The leader has assumed a range of responsibilities and acknowledges the challenges that presents. It would be beneficial to develop further the responsibilities of the staff, in order to deputise for, and support the work of, the leader.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

The staff have established an organised learning environment which supports well the development of the children's personal, social and emotional skills.

The staff interactions with the children are caring and pastoral and are mostly effective. In the effective practice, staff model language, promote thinking skills through open-questioning and participate actively in the children's play to extend their learning. A greater use of real and authentic materials in all of the curriculum areas is required to extend further the children's interest and learning.

The children's health and wellbeing are promoted well through the healthy break, physical development opportunities and a focus on dental hygiene.

There is a range of safeguarding policies in place to support the staff to help keep the children safe. Based on the evidence made available at the time of the pilot inspection, the playgroup needs to review and update a number of its safeguarding policies.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

There is an inclusive ethos in the playgroup. The staff are welcoming and encourage the children to turn-take and share. They promote well the children's social engagement during play. The staff are aware of and employ appropriate approaches which assist well the children with specific needs. They help parents to avail of support from relevant agencies.

D. EMBEDDING SUCCESS

The children observed are happy, settled and engage well with the staff and each other in the play sessions. The staff provide a supportive and nurturing learning environment. They use positive reinforcement and praise to motivate the children and build their self-confidence and self-esteem.

All of the children have good levels of independence and engage in sustained periods of concentrated play. Transitions throughout the day are smooth; the children register on arrival, self-label their work and manage the snack routine well.

Most of the children listen attentively during story time and engage enthusiastically in rhymes, songs, and outdoor music activities. Their artwork, which is detailed and recognisable, is celebrated and displayed in the playroom and the staff use a digital application (app) to share the children's work with the parents.

The children respond well to the range of opportunities provided for outdoor learning which develop their creativity, investigative and exploratory play. They engage in energetic play and are developing well their gross motor skills of balance and coordination, through the use of the wheeled vehicles, the balance beam and the hopscotch game. The children use effectively the range of implements and tools in the growing area which support the development of their fine motor skills.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

Parents are informed regularly about the work of the playgroup through the staff's use of the digital app and regular newsletters which outline the themes for learning. Feedback received from a small number of parents during the inspection indicated they would welcome further information about their child's progress, and guidance on how they can extend and support their learning at home.

Staff provide children and their families with book bags to promote an interest in reading; this is supported further with their participation in World Book Day and through regular visits to the playgroup from the staff from the local library. Good links have been established with the three local primary schools, to which almost all of the children transfer in year one.

F. CHILD PROTECTION

At the time of the inspection, the evidence provided by the playgroup demonstrates that the arrangements for child protection do not align sufficiently to the current statutory guidance; a child protection follow-up inspection will take place within six weeks.

The actions to take this work forward include:

- the completion of outstanding child protection training for all staff members as a priority, including the designated child protection officer; and
- the updating of the child protection policy in line with the current guidance.

4. GOING FORWARD

The newly-formed staff team have outlined their vision to create a welcoming, inclusive environment in which the children can develop holistically and are at an early stage of achieving it. The inspection has highlighted areas for further action that need to be addressed to assist the setting in achieving this vision. These include the establishment of strategic and robust monitoring and evaluating procedures to inform effectively the action planning and improvement processes. In addition, staff need to develop a systematic approach to the observation and assessment of the children's learning to ensure progression across all areas of the pre-school curriculum.

Mount Oriel Playgroup will require sustained external support to help it address the areas for action detailed in the report. There will be a follow-up inspection.

ADDENDUM TO THE REPORT ON THE PILOT INSPECTION OF MOUNT ORIEL PLAYGROUP, MAY 2024

Child Protection

At the time of the inspection in March 2024, the evidence provided by the playgroup demonstrated that the arrangements for child protection do not align sufficiently to the current statutory guidance. As a consequence, the Education and Training Inspectorate returned to Mount Oriel Playgroup in May 2024 to carry out a six-week child protection follow-up inspection to monitor and report on the playgroup's progress in addressing the areas for action relating to the playgroup's arrangements for child protection.

Key Findings

- the outstanding child protection training for all staff members has been completed and the designated child protection officer has secured a date for the training; and
- the child protection policy has been updated.

The arrangements for child protection now align to the current statutory guidance. The ETI will monitor the progress of the playgroup in continuing to address the remaining areas for action.

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