

Report of a Pilot Inspection
Smallfry Community Playgroup, Maguiresbridge

October 2023

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1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Smallfry Community Playgroup is located in the village of Maguiresbridge, close to Enniskillen in County Fermanagh. The children attending the playgroup come from the village and surrounding rural area and almost all transfer to one of two local primary schools. There are currently twenty-six children attending the single part-time session, a small number of whom have special educational needs (SEN).

There is a well-established and experienced team in the playgroup, comprising a leader, deputy leader and three classroom assistants, two of whom are employed to support the children with SEN. There is a two-tiered management structure which consists of six permanent trustees and a management committee onto which new members can be appointed annually. A new early years specialist (EYS) from the Early Years Organisation (EYO) has recently started working with the staff.

There is a welcoming and inclusive ethos in the playgroup which is underpinned by a commitment to serving the local community. Since 2017, the setting has partnered with another playgroup from the neighbouring village of Brookeborough, through a 'Sharing from the Start' project, which is supported by the European Union's PEACE IV Programme and involves children in the early years sector throughout Northern Ireland and the border counties taking part in *Shared Education* programmes.

B. VIEWS OF PARENTS AND STAFF

Almost 50% of the parents responded to the online confidential questionnaire and a small number of parents who responded included written comments, all of which were wholly positive. A small number of parents also met with inspectors during the inspection. Through discussions with inspectors and in their written comments, the parents expressed how happy and settled their children were in the playgroup. They praised the commitment and professionalism of the staff and were very appreciative of the excellent communication through the monthly newsletter, digital application (app) and daily informal conversations.

All of the staff responded to the questionnaire; their responses, including the small number of written comments, were positive and acknowledged in particular the collegial and supportive ethos within the team.

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

- Almost all of the children are making very good progress in all aspects of their learning, including their skills development across all areas of the pre-school curriculum.
- There is a shared vision and commitment to provide each child with the life skills and dispositions they need to learn, progress and flourish now and in the future.
- The process of self-evaluation leading to improvement is highly effective, underpinned by rigorous and regular reflective practice, and is informed appropriately by the individual needs and interests of the children.
- The two-tiered management structure provides continuity and stability of leadership.
- 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.
- The highly effective cycle of planning, observation and assessment is understood and implemented by all staff and as a result there are strengths in the provision across all areas of the pre-school curriculum.
- The highly skilled staff have created an enabling learning environment and use a wide range of successful strategies to ensure all children have access to equitable and inclusive learning experiences.
- The arrangements for child protection take full account of current child protection guidance.

3. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

Smallfry Community Playgroup is wholly committed to providing each child with the life skills and dispositions they need to learn, progress and flourish now and in the future. This commitment is shared and articulated by the leadership and all staff and drives every aspect of the life and work of the playgroup.

The process of self-evaluation leading to improvement is underpinned by rigorous and regular reflective practice and is highly effective. There is a three-year strategic development plan in place and annual priorities are informed appropriately by the individual needs and interests of the specific cohort of children each year through: meaningful consultation with parents; liaison with other health and education professionals, where appropriate; and, insightful early observations and assessment of the children's learning.

The two-tiered management structure allows for parental and community contribution while also providing continuity and stability of leadership with the longstanding trustees. The management committee is well informed about all aspects of the life and work of the playgroup, including the process of self-evaluation and the rationale for, and impact of, current and past priorities for improvement.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

There are strengths in the provision across all areas of the pre-school curriculum. The monitoring and evaluation of the children's needs, interests and progression is concise and informs very effectively the cycle of planning, observation and assessment. The highly skilled staff play a pivotal role in the planning process and articulate that this enables them to achieve their vision of providing each child with the life skills and dispositions they need to learn, progress and flourish now and in the future. All staff model play exceptionally well, listen attentively to and observe carefully the children at play. Their interactions are consistently of a very high quality, and they use open-ended questions and meaningful commentary to extend further the children's language, thinking and problem solving.

The organisation of the day and the well-resourced learning environment help the staff to provide the children with extensive opportunities to develop their knowledge, independence, decision making and self-management skills.

Priority is given to the children's health and wellbeing, which is reflected in the planned programme of learning, routines and transitions, and the quality of the relationships at all levels. This is exemplified through the attention given to following a healthy diet, engaging in physical activity and keeping safe while in the playgroup and when participating in community visits.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

In response to the individual needs of the current cohort of children, the staff have prioritised appropriately their own capacity building to meet the increasingly complex and diverse needs of the children. They have done this through building partnerships and availing of specific training with, for example, the EYO, the Education Authority (EA) and the Health and Social Care Trust (HSCT).

The individual education plans (IEPs) have been developed through close liaison with parents and other professionals and using insightful observations of the children. They outline clear targets and specific strategies to support the children's learning and development. Consequently, those children who have SEN are progressing well in their learning.

The child-led provision and the accessible and thoughtfully-resourced learning environment facilitate equity and inclusion for all children. Staff are consistently pastoral, positive and nurturing in their interactions with the children and provide each child with the support and resources they need to progress.

D. EMBEDDING SUCCESS

The children are very well settled and follow with ease the well-established routines and transitions of the day. Their personal, social and emotional skills are very well developed for the time of year; almost all of them sustain high levels of concentrated and purposeful play and are developing respectful relationships with each other and with the adults. The children initiate and extend their own play and engage collaboratively in learning, in both the indoor and outdoor learning environments.

The children's representational artwork and early mark making is of a high standard and all of the children enjoy, listen attentively and contribute confidently to the whole-group story session. They have a very good understanding of early mathematical concepts and use naturally and appropriately the language of time, measure, number and shape during play and as they follow the rules and routines. The children's knowledge and understanding of their surroundings and the world around them is also a strength owing to the learning experiences available to them through the planned pre-school programme, visits and outings in their local community, and their *Sharing from the Start* partnership.

The children have pride in their work. They approach the adults confidently to talk about their work and choose which pieces they wish to: photograph with an iPad; take home; display in the playroom; or, file in their personal scrapbooks, which are maintained by the staff and presented at the end of the year to the children as a progressive record of their achievements.

The staff have high expectations for all children. Through their in-depth knowledge of each child, and as a result of the comprehensive system in place for planning, observing and assessing, the staff provide individual learning experiences that support and extend every child in their learning across all areas of the pre-school curriculum. They know each child's strengths and provide positive feedback to the children during play, affirming their efforts and supporting them to make improvements. The staff also make very good use of a digital app to share regularly with parents the children's work and celebrate their achievements.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

All of the staff are highly reflective and strive for continuous improvement in the best interests of the children. Staff professional learning is linked strategically to the playgroup's development plan and annual action plans and is impacting positively on both the provision and on the outcomes for children. A wide range of capacity-building opportunities are sourced and availed of annually by the staff in order to continuously develop their knowledge and understanding of how to best support the children in their care.

A nurturing and inclusive ethos permeates the life and work of the playgroup and relationships are excellent at all levels. Partnerships with a range of professionals, including the EYS, and within and beyond the local community, are highly valued. This is evidenced through, for example, the work with the library in the neighbouring town of Lisnaskea and the *Sharing from the Start* partnership, in which staff use the voice of the child, parental feedback and their own insightful evaluations of the learning to inform planning and demonstrate impact on outcomes for all.

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

Smallfry Community Playgroup provides a high-quality, nurturing, inclusive and safe environment in which each individual child is encouraged and supported to develop the life skills and dispositions they need to learn, progress and flourish now and in the future. This is achieved through: the excellent relationships at all levels; the openness of staff and leadership to working in partnership with and learning from others; and a shared commitment to the children, their families and the local community.

ETI will continue to work with Smallfry Community Playgroup, including to share examples of highly-effective practice from which others may learn. The main aspect of practice which should be shared more widely is the:

- comprehensive approach to the cycle of planning, observation and assessment that ensures equity of opportunity and experience for all children.

The Education and Training Inspectorate

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