

Report of Pre-school Inspection
Carnhill Nursery School

January 2025



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Throughout the report the use of an asterisk * denotes further information included at Appendix 2.

1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Carnhill Nursery School is a controlled nursery school located in the Greater Shantallow area of Derry. It is a purpose-built nursery school and provides two full-time classes catering for 52 pre-school children. In 2019, an additional multi-purpose room, known as 'The Ruby Room', was added to facilitate one-to-one and small group work with the children.

Almost all of the children attending the nursery school come from the Greater Shantallow area which has a high level of socio-economic need. Currently, 54% of the children have free school meal entitlement and 17% of the children are on the special educational needs (SEN) register.

The teaching principal is supported by an assistant teacher, two full-time nursery assistants, and four learning support assistants.

The nursery school is working towards 'Eco-Schools Green Flag'* status and has achieved bronze and silver awards in Eco-Schools and gold in the Green Tree Schools Award'*. The nursery school is a member of the well-established North West nursery cluster group and has benefitted from joint training, peer to peer visits and sharing of effective practice.

On the first day of the inspection there were fifteen children in attendance due to the inclement weather conditions; attendance increased to 40 children on the second day.

B. VIEWS OF PARENTS AND STAFF

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

Seventy-nine percent of parents/carers (41) responded to the online confidential questionnaire, 14 of whom provided written comments. The responses were very positive about almost all aspects of the provision in the nursery school. In the written comments, the parents/carers praised: the nurturing, caring environment created by the welcoming, approachable staff; the variety of outdoor learning activities and opportunities for the children to explore; and the excellent communication from the nursery school staff. The small number of parents/carers who met with an inspector spoke positively about how much their child loves attending the nursery school and the excellent relationships between the parents and staff.

All of the staff responded to the questionnaire, and their responses were very positive. One-half of the staff (5) provided written comments. They expressed their enjoyment of working in the nursery school as a valued team member and reported the challenges arising from the increasing numbers of children with additional needs.

A summary of the questionnaire responses, including any issues raised, was shared with the principal and a representative of the board of governors.

C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) worked alongside Carnhill Nursery School to consider how well the nursery 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

- Carnhill Nursery School staff live out their shared vision of providing a relaxing, nurturing and inclusive environment that enables all of the children to build their confidence and succeed.
- Almost all of the children are making good progress across all areas of the pre-school curriculum.
- The robust self-evaluation processes enable the staff to identify strategic areas for development and make tangible improvements to the provision, most recently in supporting children who have special educational needs and the emotional health and wellbeing needs of the school community.
- The highly skilled staff promote a sense of wonder, awe and excitement in the children and enable them to make good progress through their sensitive and supportive interactions and the provision of an inspiring learning environment.
- The staff's in-depth knowledge of each child, combined with the use of highly effective strategies and personalised intervention programmes, enable the children to make good progress, particularly in their communication skills and language development.
- The children are naturally curious learners who can sustain investigative and imaginative play, both individually and with their peers, for extended periods of time.
- Well-established and highly valued partnerships with parents, local nursery schools and the wider community are impacting positively on the children and the staff.

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

3. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

Carnhill Nursery School's vision statement seeks to ensure that each child has the opportunity to grow in self-confidence, and through stimulating play, progress in all areas of their development in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. The long-established staff team and the recently reconstituted board of governors are fully committed to achieving the vision. All of the staff live out their shared vision and provide a relaxing, nurturing and inclusive environment that enables all of the children to thrive and succeed in their learning.

The governors are very supportive of the staff and use their experience, knowledge and various skills to good effect. They are proactively engaging in a wide range of training that is benefitting them in carrying out their role. The governor who met with inspectors spoke with pride about the nursery school's very positive reputation in the community; the warm welcoming environment; and the child-centred focus.

There is a collegial approach to school improvement and a shared commitment by all of the staff to support each child's individual progress and nurture their personal development, in line with the nursery school's vision. The action plans within the very detailed development plan contain relevant priorities for improvement that are based on robust self-evaluation processes including a comprehensive consultation process with all staff, parents, governors and visitors to the nursery school. The current priority on developing a whole school approach to emotional health and wellbeing is having a positive impact on the children and the staff's confidence and self-esteem.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

The staff provide a high-quality and well-organised learning environment where the children are excited about the learning opportunities provided and where they can explore, experiment and investigate.

Staff interactions with the children are consistently skilful and sensitive, creating a supportive environment where the children are at ease and engage readily in conversations with adults and each other. The staff are highly adaptive, capitalising on incidental learning opportunities to promote the children's learning and development. For example, discussions about the children's journey to school in snowy conditions, making ice art, and feeding the birds with leftover food from snack time provided learning moments that extended the children's language and enhanced their understanding of the world around them.

A strong emphasis is placed on developing the children's language and communication skills. Books are integrated thoughtfully into almost every area of play, and parents are encouraged to engage with their child by reading together in the hallway before the start of the nursery day and by making use of the outdoor lending library. The use of rhyme and song enriches further the children's language development and enables them to make good progress in their communication skills.

A strength of the provision is the outdoor area which has been thoughtfully developed, creating a safe and exciting space that promotes learning across all areas of the pre-school curriculum. For example, the polytunnel allows children to plant and grow flowers and vegetables and a partnership with Derry City Council has enhanced the children's opportunities for gardening through the planting of bulbs.

The dedicated staff invest time in getting to know the children and their families from the beginning of the children's nursery school experience. They use a range of effective approaches, including questionnaires, stay-and-play sessions, and screening assessments* for speech and language to ensure that each child has access to a play programme that is tailored to their individual needs and interests. Planning is comprehensive at all levels, reviewed regularly and shows clear progression. Observations of the children's learning are insightful, documenting clearly their achievements and outlining next steps to support their ongoing development.

The health and wellbeing of the whole school community is a current priority. The staff have concentrated their efforts on improving the mental health and wellbeing of the children which is boosting the children's confidence and promoting positive attitudes which contribute to a readiness for learning. The snack routine is used effectively to promote healthy eating habits and develop the children's independence. Recognising that healthy children also require healthy families, the nursery uses well the parental information board to direct parents to local services, hubs, and community groups that support mental health. The 'Healthy Futures Programme' also offers parents guidance on preparing nutritious meals using low-energy appliances, promoting family-wide health. The parents who met with the inspector spoke highly of the programme and of their enjoyment in making healthier meals. Motivational quotes displayed throughout the space contribute to a positive atmosphere, while a strong team approach also supports staff wellbeing.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

A recent priority for the school has been to empower parents to support their child's learning. This is reflected in the well-structured organisation of the nursery day where parents can play with their child at the start of the day, as well as visit the playroom and speak with staff at the end of the day. Monthly newsletters provide valuable and practical guidance, helping parents to support their child's learning at home and strengthen further the home-school partnership.

The proactive staff access professional learning opportunities, where they are available, and collaborate with a range of stakeholders to equip them to support the increasing number of children with additional and complex needs. As a result, the staff are highly skilled in supporting these children and use successfully tailored

strategies, such as individual and small group support, to progress the children's language. These personalised approaches support the children very well to access the pre-school curriculum and enable them to make good progress. 'The Ruby Room' is used strategically and effectively by the staff, in agreement with parents, to support children who, from time to time, require a calming and sensory space. The children have access to a range of sensory toys that enables them to manage their emotions and through effective support from the staff, the children reintegrate quickly into the playroom.

Well-established and effective processes are in place for identifying children with special educational needs. Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and Personal Learning Plans (PLPs)* outline clear targets and personalised strategies to support children with special educational needs, in a focused and purposeful manner which enables the children to make good progress.

D. DEFINING, CELEBRATING AND EMBEDDING SUCCESS

Almost all of the children are making good progress across all areas of the curriculum.

The children are kind and respectful in their interactions towards each other and with the adults. The child-centred approach used by all staff ensures that individual and whole class successes are acknowledged and celebrated. For example, the children's work is displayed on the playroom walls and in the entrance foyer and achievements are shared with parents on a digital application. As a result, the children are developing well their self-esteem and creativity. They have a positive attitude to learning and enjoy 'having a go'. Learning journey boards have recently been introduced by the teachers to document the progress the children are making and share with parents the wide range of learning experiences.

The children have high levels of independence, are very familiar with the daily routines, and are proud to take on the roles of classroom and lunchtime helpers. Most of the children engage in sustained periods of concentrated and purposeful play and talk confidently to the staff and visitors about their learning experiences.

The children have a good understanding of early mathematical concepts, such as, number, patterns, sorting, naming 2-dimensional shapes and comparing and contrasting objects for size and colour. Most of the children integrate naturally mathematical language across the curricular areas, including during the snack routine. Songs and rhymes are used very effectively by the staff to reinforce mathematical language.

Most of the children show an interest in mark-making and a small number have begun to form letters and, while not a requirement of the pre-school curriculum, can write their own name. A significant minority of the children's early representational painting of a snowman is very advanced. The 'Painting of the Week' is celebrated in each class with the children's artwork displayed proudly on 'Our Proud Wall'. The children are developing well their fine motor skills, creating very detailed clay snowmen. They use authentic resources confidently in the hairdressers' role play area to style each other's hair. The children experiment with a wide range of resources, such as wooden blocks in the construction area, to investigate music and rhythm.

The children experience a sense of awe, wonder and excitement in their learning, particularly in the world around us (WAU) area of the curriculum. They are very keen to explore and investigate the wide range of stimulating resources available to them. They have a natural interest in and curiosity about their environment, observing the birds feed from the children's bird feeder constructions, and watching the fish swim in the fish tank.

The children are taught to look after the environment. 'Reduce, reuse, recycle' is embedded in the playgroup. The children have an excellent understanding of the importance of recycling as reported by the parents who met with an inspector.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

The staff enjoy a close partnership with parents. The parents welcome their involvement in initiatives such as the Department of Education's (DE) 'Getting Ready to Learn'* workshops, 'Stay and Play' visits and reading with parents evening sessions. The parents reported that engagement in these sessions helps to cultivate their close partnership with the staff and supports them to use strategies with their child at home.

The parent noticeboard contains helpful information on how parents can help their child learn at home and directs parents to external support agencies in the local areas, for example the Greater Shantallow Area Partnership community support agency.

There are well-established links between the nursery school and local primary schools to support the children as they move to the next phase of their education. The nursery school welcomes students from the local post primary schools and the North West Regional College which benefits both the students in their work experience and the nursery school children in their language development.

The staff participate in professional learning opportunities which are linked strategically to priorities within the school development plan and the needs of the children. The staff have proactively sourced 'Being Well Doing Well'* training to help them to implement effective strategies to support the increasing number of children with emotional needs. As active members of the North West Nursery Cluster group, the staff are benefitting from joint training in first aid, autism awareness and the sharing of effective practice through visiting other nursery schools.

F. CHILD PROTECTION

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

4. GOING FORWARD

Carnhill Nursery School is creating successfully a child-centred and inclusive nurturing environment where the children thrive and make good progress in their learning. The children benefit greatly from extremely stimulating, investigative and exploratory play within the nursery school.

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

- highly effective processes in place to identify and support children who have additional learning needs, including those with SEN;
- thoughtfully planned world around us programme which promotes the children's curiosity and high-quality investigative play; and
- a very strong partnership with parents which enables the children to make good progress.

The ETI will continue to work with Carnhill Nursery School, including to share the examples of highly effective practice set out above from which others may learn.

5. APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: QUANTITATIVE TERMS

In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75% - 90%
A majority	-	50% - 74%
A significant minority	-	30% - 49%
A minority	-	10% - 29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10%

APPENDIX 2: NOTES

- Page 2** **The Eco-schools bronze and silver awards** are achieved when a nursery school can demonstrate that they have met the identified criteria and taken specific environmental actions. A school must achieve the bronze and silver awards before they can achieve Green Flag status.
- Page 2** **The Woodland Trust ‘Green Tree Schools Award’** encourages schools to participate in outdoor learning environmental projects, such as tree planting, visiting woods and improving their grounds.
- Page 5** **A screening assessment for speech and language** is used by the staff to identify a child’s speech and language and communication needs.
- Page 6** The teachers are in the process of transitioning **from IEPs to PLPs**, beginning with writing PLPs for children at Stage 3 of the SEN Register.
- Page 7** The Department of Education’s (DE) **‘Getting Ready to Learn’ programme** is an application-based programme to engage and empower parents to help them create and sustain positive home learning environments.
- Page 7** The EA **‘Being Well Doing Well’ programme** is part of ‘The Children and Young People’s Emotional Health in Education Framework’ (DE) in nursery, primary, post-primary and special schools to develop a whole-school approach to emotional health and wellbeing.

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