An Roinn Oideachais agus Óige
Department of Education and Youth

Early Years Education Inspection (EYEI)

Final Report

Setting name	Little Acorns Pre-school
Setting address	St. Tola's National School Tullyglass Shannon County Clare V14Y625
TUSLA registration number	TU2015CE075
DCEDIY number	16CE0213
Date of inspection	04-12-2025
Date of issue of report	23-03-2026

What is an Early Years Education Inspection?

The Early Years Education Inspection model is used to provide evaluative information, advice and support in relation to the education of children aged birth to six years in early learning and care settings. The inspections will affirm good practice and provide advice to support internal quality development processes that optimise children's education experiences and outcomes.

How to read this report

During this inspection, the inspector evaluated and reported under the following headings or areas of enquiry:

- Quality of the context to support children's learning and development
- Quality of processes to support children's learning and development
- Quality of children's learning experiences and achievements
- Quality of management and leadership for learning

Inspectors describe the quality of each of these areas using the Inspectorate's quality continuum which is shown on the final page of this report. The quality continuum provides examples of the language used by inspectors when evaluating and describing the quality of the setting's provision in each area.

The early years setting was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and actions advised of the report; a response was not received from the setting.

Early Years Education Inspection

Date of inspection	04-12-2025

Activities conducted during the Inspection

- Pre-inspection meeting with the setting manager/lead educator
- Review of setting documentation and records relating to the children's learning and development
- Review of the education resources and facilities
- Observations of interactions during one Early Childhood Care and Education Programme session
- Interaction with children
- Interaction with early years educators
- Feedback meeting with the setting manager/lead educator and assistant educator

Context of setting

Little Acorns Pre-school Montessori is a privately owned and managed early learning and care setting located in St Tola's National School in Shannon, Co Clare. The setting operates a morning Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme accommodating up to twenty pre-school children. On the day of inspection, the manager/lead educator was supported by two assistant educators.

Area 1: Quality of context to support children's learning and development

- The quality of the context to support the children's learning and development was excellent.
- The educators created a very calm, relaxed and homely atmosphere that strongly supported the children's emotional wellbeing.
- The educators co-operatively embedded a slow relational pedagogy in an exemplary way. They remained responsive, attuned and present with the children, interacting with them through soft vocal tones and affirmative interactions.
- The educators understood the critical importance of implementing the key person approach. They skilfully observed the naturally forming educator-child relationships over time and then assigned key groups to ensure strong, authentic attachments. This practice consistently supported the children's learning experiences.
- The pace of the day was mostly determined by the children and included long periods of child-led play, both indoors and outdoors, an enjoyable whole-group gathering for relaxation, a very social snack and an interactive song-time.
- The educators ensured the children experienced minimal transitions. They very effectively supported the children through providing generous advance notice of tidy-up, modelling of key tasks and the provision of ample time for the children to finish their food during snack time.
- The educators' meaningful approach to nurturing each child's sense of identity and belonging celebrated their individuality. Photographs of the children and their families were gathered, discussed, and subsequently displayed in poster format in the learning environment.
- Building very effective community connections was valued. The educators welcomed many community members to visit the setting to speak with the children, including a musician, an ambulance driver and local builders. The educators also brought the children on many walks in the locality, such as to the nearby 'magic garden', the woodlands and the playground.

Area 2: Quality of processes to support children's learning and development

- The quality of the processes to support the children's learning and development was very good.
- The educators implemented an emergent and play-based pedagogy that was very effectively framed by *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. The educators skilfully facilitated the children's learning and development in an open-ended strengths-based way. They formally planned learning experiences using broad long-term themes and short-term ideas drawn directly from the children's interests and engagement.

- The educators gathered rich assessment information through many photographs, notes of the children's 'in the moment' learning and they completed regular formal observations of each child's key learning. Combining this rich information, the educators illustrated each child's unique learning journey through individual portfolios and whole-group experiences in a group learning journal.
- Within the formal observations, the educators described very clear and tailored next steps in learning for each child. However, the educators did not always clearly demonstrate how they used these next steps to inform future curriculum planning and assessment for learning.
- The educators arranged an extensive and exemplary range of play materials within a spacious free-flow learning environment. They provided real items, such as hairdresser props, recycled food packaging, telephones and computers. The sensory resources, sand and water, and creative materials such as paint, playdough and chalk supported the children's exploration and creativity.
- A noteworthy feature of the environment was the very comfortable and inviting reading area with cushions and carpeted flooring, where the children could relax on soft seating. Recognising the children's desire to hide away, the educators also included a tent and many open-ended items which the children used to construct dens and forts.
- The educators motivated and supported the children's learning in a respectful and caring way. The educators were attuned to the children's interests, needs and personalities and engaged with them supportively and sensitively as play partners.
- The setting was very inclusive of all children. The educators had created clear plans to support the children's meaningful participation, and they engaged in an exemplary manner with many relevant external agencies. Additionally, the educators participated in targeted professional development that effectively supported inclusive practices.

Action advised

- To strengthen assessment for learning, the educators are advised to clearly demonstrate how identified next steps directly inform ongoing curriculum planning to progress each child's learning and development.

Area 3: Quality of children's learning experiences and achievements

- The quality of children's learning experiences and achievements was excellent.
- The children were happy, content and secure in the learning environment. They were active agents who directed their learning throughout the morning. They selected resources, and played independently and collaboratively with their peers, in pairs and in small groups.
- The children's developing friendships were evident through very warm, caring child-child interactions. One child made a very special birthday cake for his friend.
- The educators' sensitive support guided the children to develop the skills for independent conflict resolution as they modelled empathy, respect, and understanding.
- The children engaged in many activities, such as whole-body movement, dance, mindfulness activities, singing, and story-time, which supported their physical wellbeing and self-regulation. A trampoline was available to the children indoors as well as many opportunities for gross motor development in the outdoors.
- The children were confident and capable communicators. The educators intentionally provided time and space to support the children in expressing their ideas, thoughts, and feelings.
- The children explored a wide range of experiences that promoted creativity and imaginative play, such as play-dough manipulation, painting and free mark-making. In the outdoors, one educator enthusiastically nurtured a child's unique interest by picking petals and leaves from flowers and plants and discussing their scents before mixing them with water to make perfume. The educators also placed a toy oven near the playdough table to enable the children to bake their buns and cakes with ease.
- The children engaged in many activities that very effectively supported their developing knowledge of science and nature. For instance, at the water tray, the children investigated ice, and with the educator, they discussed how it felt, its composition and how it might melt.

Area 4: Quality of management and leadership for learning

- The quality of management and leadership for learning was excellent.
- The manager and the educator team demonstrated a very strong partnership and collaborative approach to the facilitation of high-quality early years education. They used a staff handbook to guide consistent practice underpinned by a shared vision. Commendably, the educators met monthly to reflect on and develop practice across all standards of *Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* and to support facilitation of high-quality early learning experiences. Innovatively, the educators used guidance templates from the *Aistear Siolta Practice Guide* to systematically review the learning environments and materials, to recall and plan with the children and to organise outings.
- The educators actively promoted positive parental partnerships and viewed these relationships as fundamental to their high-quality practice. They communicated regularly through handbooks, newsletters, childcare management software and by sharing children's learning portfolios.
- Innovatively, the educators sought the parents' views on how they would like their culture and home life to be included in the setting through unique 'getting-to-know-me' forms, which included questions like *'What do my family love about me?'* and *'What do we love about our community?'*. They also regularly supported parents by providing tailored information on *Aistear* and guidance on supporting the children's wellbeing.
- The educators promoted exemplary settling-in procedures, where parents could remain in the pre-school for extended periods until their children were fully settled and happy to remain on their own.
- The educators worked closely with the primary school and had built very strong relationships with the principal and the teachers. The pre-school children participated in many school events and the educators effectively used an agreed formal transition document to share strengths-based learning on each child with the relevant teachers.

Summary of overall inspection

Area	Quality level
Quality of context to support children's learning and development	Excellent
Quality of processes to support children's learning and development	Very good
Quality of children's learning experiences and achievements	Excellent
Quality of management and leadership for learning	Excellent

Language used in Early Years Education Inspection Reports

Inspectors describe the quality of provision in the setting using the language which is shown below.

Level	Description	Examples of descriptive terms
Excellent	**Provision that is excellent** is exemplary in meeting the needs of learners. This provision provides an example for other schools and settings of exceptionally high standards of provision.	Excellent; exemplary; outstanding; exceptionally high standard; with very significant strengths
Very good	**Provision that is very good** is very effective in meeting the needs of learners and is of a very high standard. There is potential to build on existing strengths to achieve an excellent standard.	Very good; of a very high quality; very effective practice; highly commendable; very successful
Good	**Provision that is good** is effective in meeting the needs of learners. There is need to build on existing strengths in order to address the aspects to be developed and achieve a very good standard.	Good; of good quality; effective practice; competent; useful; commendable; good standard; strengths outweigh the shortcomings; appropriate provision although some possibilities for improvement exist
Requires improvement to achieve a good standard	**Provision that requires improvement to achieve a good standard** is not sufficiently effective in meeting the needs of learners. There is need to address certain deficiencies without delay in order to ensure that provision is good or better.	Fair; less than effective; less than sufficient; evident weaknesses that are impacting on learning; experiencing difficulty; shortcomings outweigh strengths; must improve in specified areas; action required to improve
Requires significant improvement to achieve a good standard	**Provision that requires significant improvement to achieve a good standard** is not meeting the needs of learners. There is immediate need for significant action to address the areas of concern.	Weak; poor; ineffective; insufficient; unacceptable; experiencing significant difficulties; serious deficiencies in the areas evaluated; requiring significant change, development and improvement to be effective

The following resources can be used by ELC settings in their quality improvement:

Aistear Siolta Practice Guide

Aistear - Nurturing Skills website

Department of Education Insights – Quality in Early Years Education webinars

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