An Roinn Oideachais agus Óige
Department of Education and Youth

Early Years Education Inspection (EYEI)

Final Report

Setting name	The Den
Setting address	Killeshin Community Development Ltd. Killeshin County Laois R93TC79
TUSLA registration number	TU2015LS021
DCEDIY number	09LS0025
Date of inspection	11-11-2025
Date of issue of report	09-02-2026

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.

Early Years Education Inspection

Dates of inspection	11-11-2025

Activities conducted during the Inspection

- Pre-inspection meeting with the setting manager and a lead early years 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 two Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme sessions
- Interaction with children
- Interaction with early years educators
- Feedback meeting with the setting manager and assistant manager

Context of setting

The Den is a community run Early Learning and Care (ELC) setting located in Killeshin, County Laois. Established in 2002, the setting provides two morning sessions for children participating in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme and a school aged childcare service. This inspection focussed on the ECCE programme sessions. Twenty-seven children, five early years educators, the setting manager and assistant manager were present. 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.

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 very good.
- There was a very calm, friendly and inviting atmosphere in the setting. Children and parents were greeted by a member of the management team as they arrived. As the children entered their learning rooms, they enthusiastically greeted one another and supported by educators, they put away their belongings before choosing their preferred play experiences.
- Educators nurtured warm and positive relationships with the children and their families. They had recently introduced a key person approach to further support their relationships with their key children and their engagement with parents as partners in children's learning.
- The daily routines had set sequences and some flexibility to accommodate children's play interests and needs. There were many whole-group learning experiences that limited opportunities for children to engage in uninterrupted child-led play.
- Educators purposefully used transition times to support children's learning and development. They announced pending changes to the routines ahead of time and were mindful of children's sensory sensitivities when choosing transition strategies. Among the strategies used were verbal announcements and briefly turning the lights off.
- Snack times were valued as social occasions and as times to support children's independence, self-help and conversation skills. The educators sat and ate with the children, and together they engaged in discussions about family life and topics of interest, including recent family holidays and flying on an airplane.
- Among the strategies used by the educators to support children's sense of identity and belonging were family and birthday charts and personalised coat hooks, diversity related storybooks and wall displayed photographic imagery.
- Parents and members of the local community were invited into the setting to share their professions and hobbies with the children. These included a dental hygienist and a *Garda*. Photographs of these learning experiences were recorded in the children's learning journals.

Actions advised

- To provide more opportunities for children to engage in uninterrupted child-led play, the educators are advised to replace whole-group learning experiences with optional small-group experiences that run alongside child-led free play opportunities.
- To optimise children's learning from community engagement events and during their exploration of cultural diversity, the educators are advised to record these events, and similar group experiences, in group learning journals. They are advised to revisit these rich learning experiences regularly with the children.

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 a highly effective emergent play-based curriculum that was informed by *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. There were no formal procedures to inform the curriculum planning and assessment practices. The curriculum planning was informed by educator-initiated thematic and seasonal events and some of the children's play interests.
- The educators used learning records and learning journals to record information about the children's learning progress. These records included plans to support each child's next steps in their learning journey.
- The educators used praiseworthy, playful and language-rich interactions with the children that added learning value to their play and learning experiences. They were attuned to each child's interests and used open-ended questioning with them to support the co-construction of knowledge and a solutions-based approach to problem solving.
- The print-rich indoor learning environments were very well organised into interest areas that included construction, transport, home/kitchen and libraries. There were very few fact-based books.
- There were three different outdoor learning areas, a sheltered playground, a digging area and a field. Together, these areas provided children with multi-sensory and risk-rich physical play experiences.
- The educators intentionally supported and extended children's early science, technology engineering and mathematics (STEM) skills and knowledge. For example, children were using rulers to make different shapes and pretend roadways. One child proudly said 'look, my road is long and narrow'.
- Play was valued by the educators as the main medium for children's learning; to interact with, explore and make sense of the world. The children had opportunities to engage in play activities alone, with peers and with the educators.
- The inclusion co-ordinator and educator team were very committed to the provision of an inclusive experience for all children in the daily activities. They recognised and accommodated diversity in the style, pace and focus of children's learning, and worked collaboratively with external agencies in partnership with parents.

Actions advised

- The management and educator teams are advised to review the curriculum policy and set out procedures for curriculum planning and assessment practices. Key educators are advised to record their key child's established play interests and individual learning needs and ensure these periodically informed the short-term curriculum plans.
- The educators are advised to provide more fact-based books in the learning environments to support and extend children's areas of interest. For example, recipe books in the kitchen areas and building magazines in the construction areas.

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

- The quality of children's learning experiences and achievements was very good.
- The children displayed much enjoyment and a positive sense of wellbeing throughout the sessions. They became immersed in their fun filled play scenarios which included a spontaneous Hip Hop dance session. In the other learning room, children thoroughly enjoyed an educator-led puppet show.

- The children were displaying many positive learning dispositions. While a small group of children played with sand they displayed sustained engagement, creativity, resourcefulness, persistence and problem-solving skills.
- The children experienced success through their informal conversations with the educators and viewing their artwork on display. There were missed opportunities for the children to purposefully revisit their past learning experiences, to be involved in daily tasks, and to make their voices visible in the learning environment.
- The children displayed the capacity to communicate and self-regulate their emotions. Educators used emotions-based displays, small group activities, deep breathing techniques and social story books to support children to develop positive emotional literacy skills.
- The children displayed a strong sense of confidence in their developing self-help skills and to use positive social skills that included the ability to listen to their peers, express empathy and play co-operatively.
- The children communicated their thoughts and ideas very creatively through action songs, dance, mark-making, drawing, playdough modelling, open-ended art and crafts, construction work and storytelling.
- The children were making sense of their world through playful inquisitive exploration. One child was exploring how to use a measuring tape. Other children were exploring their schematic play interests using wooden blocks, including connection/disconnection, transporting and balance.

Actions advised

- To further support children to identify as agentic, competent and confident learners, educators are advised to provide opportunities for them to revisit their past learning experiences an achievements. Retaining the learning journals for the two ECCE years and recap and recall sessions will support this work.
- To ensure children's voices are heard and acted upon, educators are advised to include children's reflective comments in the learning journals when reviewing the content with their key educator. They are also advised to involve children more in the day-to-day activities, such as more job roles, self-sign-in stations and when implementing their individual learning support plans, as set out in the learning records.

Area 4: Quality of management and leadership for learning

- The quality of management and leadership for learning was very good.
- The board of management (BOM) appointed the management team to oversee the day-to-day operation of the setting. Pedagogical oversight tasks and internal evaluation practices were shared across the management team.
- There was a very strong ethos of teamwork among the management and educator teams, and commitment to providing a high-quality learning and development experience for all children.
- The management team supported and supervised the educator team informally. A member of the BOM conducting formal annual appraisals with all staff members.
- Formal staff meetings were conducted monthly by the management team. Each educator had two hours of non-contact time built into the weekly staff roster to enable them to carry out their curriculum planning and assessment tasks.
- The BOM provided financial support for educators to upskill and partake in continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities. Among topics covered in most recently attended courses were positive behaviours strategies and the Talk Boost and the Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years (LINC) programmes.
- The setting had previously engaged with the Better Start Quality Development service to support their internal evaluation for quality development. They had yet to establish a formal approach to continue this internal review work into the future.
- The educators shared information with parents through a messaging application and at drop off and collection times. Children's learning records and journals were shared with parents at the end of the school year, with parent-educator meetings conducted when the need arose.
- The children's transition into the setting was supported by the educators through child-centred induction phase and a welcome pack that included a parents' handbook. Their transition to primary school was supported through the use of the National Council for

Curriculum and Assessment *Mo Scéal* resources, and meetings with the parents to discuss the content.

Actions advised

- The management team is advised to designate a member of the team to pedagogical oversight and internal evaluation for quality development. In addition, they are advised to establish a more robust, proactive and reoccurring approach to conducting internal evaluations using the full suite of self-evaluation tools of the *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide*.
- The educators are advised to share information about the children's learning progress more regularly with parents. This could be achieved by utilising a combination of parent evenings, telephone conversations and using a secure messaging application.

Summary of overall inspection

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

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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