An Roinn Oideachais agus Óige
Department of Education and Youth

Early Years Education Inspection (EYEI)

Final Report

Setting name	Little Explorers Childcare Ltd
Setting address	The Meadows Marlton Road County Wicklow A67N156
TUSLA registration number	TU2017WW502
DCEDIY number	17WW0309
Date of inspection	12-05-2026
Date of issue of report	25-06-2026

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(s) 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	12-05-2026

Activities conducted during the Inspection

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

Context of setting

Little Explorers Childcare Ltd, located in County Wicklow, is one of four branches of Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School Age Childcare (SAC) settings operated by the registered provider. This full day care setting provides three concurrent sessions to children participating in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme. On the day of the inspection, nine educators and fifty-four children were present across the three pre-school sessions. Members of the senior management team, the setting manager, two assistant managers, and two room leaders attended the post-inspection feedback meeting.

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 pleasant and inviting atmosphere in the setting. The educators and management team showed positive regard for the children and their families as they engaged in relaxed conversations with the children and families during arrival times. This was supported by an open-door policy.
- The flexible daily routine centred on children's individual play interests and provided generous time for children to fully immerse themselves in child-led, multi-sensory play.
- The educators implemented an unhurried daily routine which allowed choice and agency to the children over their engagement in learning experiences and promoted the development of the children's skills, knowledge and learning dispositions. It included free-choice indoor and outdoor play, story time and a mealtime.
- The minimal transitions within the daily routine were commendably managed using verbal signals by the educators, and they supported children with navigating the move from one activity to another by helping them to tidy up while praising their efforts. A staggered approach to transitioning children from the garden to mealtimes was observed.
- The relationships between the educators and the children were respectful and responsive. They implemented a key person approach for the purpose of documenting children's learning. They compiled individual scrapbooks for their key group of children and communicated with parents regularly regarding children's learning and development.
- Mealtimes were a social occasion. The children sat with their peers and engaged in conversations. They made healthy choices and discussed their favourite fruit and the flavour of the smoothie. Several children had opportunities to take on responsibility during the mealtime ritual by handing out plates and cups. A very successful rolling snack table was observed in one pre-school room.
- Children's learning experiences, including self-care routines were used to support learning and implement a relational pedagogy. Children were supported to become confident and independent as they removed their shoes and put on their slippers, washed their face after snack time and managed their personal care routines such as toileting and hand washing.
- The educator's nurtured the children's sense identity and belonging within the learning environment using colourful displays including children's artwork, family photographs and

birthday displays. The reflection of diverse play resources in the learning environment was limited.
- Parents and families were involved in the curriculum and encouraged to participate where available. Wonderful displays of previous parental and community engagements included visits from parents who discussed their heritage and interests, a local librarian and local musician and members of *An Garda Síochána*. An upcoming visit from the Fire Brigade provoked excitement amongst the children.

Action advised

- In order to recognise, value and affirm diversity, the educators are encouraged to expand the books, visuals and play resources available to the children to reflect a greater variety of ethnicities, cultures and abilities.

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 play-based curriculum, underpinned by *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework.*
- Curriculum planning was organised into long, medium and short-term plans which documented the educators' approach to developing children's skills, knowledge and understanding and extending their interests through weekly projects. The educators recorded children's interests linked to play areas within the learning room. It was unclear how these interests informed the weekly theme.
- The educators assessed the children's learning and their progress through the use of written observations and developmental checklists completed for each child at various intervals. The observations included photographs and descriptions of the learning experiences that occurred over the past month. These were shared with parents. A summary of the daily activities and a selection of photographs was shared with parents in each learning room daily, using a software application.
- The indoor learning environment was well organised by the educators into interest areas to support children's engagement in play. The resources available included materials for sensory play such as sand, water, playdough and various tuff trays, imaginative play, construction play and tabletop activities as well as mark making and books.
- The children had access to three large outdoor areas consisting of a wide range of equipment to promote children's gross and fine motor skills. The resources included: swings, slides, a climbing wall, a water wall, sand, sensory tuff trays, a mud kitchen and sports equipment such as balls, a basketball hoop, balance beams and ride on bikes.
- The educators viewed play as being central to children's learning and development. They provided ample time for children to bask in their freely chosen play experiences. They were observed engaging as play partners, allowing the children to lead their own learning in a purposeful way.
- The educators used calm, positive tones when interacting with the children. They responded to children's interests and questions promptly and engaged in conversations that supported children's problem-solving skills.
- Children had many opportunities to engage with resources that build early positive dispositions towards science through hands-on, active experiences such as playdough, playing with blocks and magnets and various sensory play experiences such as exploring sinking and floating items in water.
- An inclusive approach was adopted to ensure the engagement of all the children. The setting had made links with a range of external agencies and accessed support through the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) with a view to optimising the participation of all children.

Actions advised

- The educators are advised to develop their assessment practices to take greater account of children's individual learning dispositions, interests, skills and knowledge. The resources available from the *Aistear, Síolta Practice Guide* will support educators with planning for and developing an emergent curriculum using a continuous cycle of noticing, nurturing, responding and reflecting.

- The educators are advised to make connections between the children's interests, their next steps in learning, and the short-term curriculum plan.

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

- The quality of children's learning experiences and achievements was very good.
- The children demonstrated positive dispositions for learning and had autonomy over their routine and experiences throughout the morning. The children were interested and very engaged in the play activities and explorations that they initiated and lead themselves as well as the adult-guided learning activities such as circle time. They were facilitated to make decisions and choices about their own play, which positively impacted on their high levels of engagement.
- The children were observed playing co-operatively in small groups both indoors and outdoors. The educators supported the children with social engagement and were observed positively role-modelling communication in children's play. For example, while exploring playdough one of the educators took turns with the children, naming various shapes and objects. The result was a child delighted with her new "glasses"!
- Throughout the sessions, the educators regularly offered meaningful praise and encouragement to the children by using positive phrases and affirming feedback to foster children's sense of achievement.
- Storytelling and circle time were greatly enjoyed by children. They demonstrated active listening skills and enjoyed the opportunity to have their voices heard during circle time. The children were secure and at ease in the setting. They appeared confident in approaching the educators to initiate conversation and responded to the educators' open-ended questions with confidence.
- Various mark making resources for the children to creatively express themselves were freely accessible to the children. There was scope to extend the resources available for imaginative and socio-dramatic play by including a greater variety of real-life items.
- The children were developing their sense of independence. They had opportunities to act in a helper role and carried out duties with enthusiasm such as, organising the shoes and slippers and cleaning up after mealtimes and line leader.
- The children experienced success through their informal conversations with the educators, viewing their artwork on display and having access to their individual and group learning journals. There were missed opportunities to support children to appreciate their own unique learning journeys by documenting the voice of the child on their artwork and in their personal learning journals.
- The children had a wonderful awareness of the natural world. They took nature walks in the local area and were excited for an upcoming outing to a local farm. They also had nets, magnifying glasses and pots for investigating insects in the outdoor area.

Actions advised

- In order to enrich the children's self-expression and creativity, the educators are advised to include a greater variety of real-life materials in the interest areas.
- The educators are advised to recognise and include more evidence of the children's voice and reflections on their own learning. For example, on their collaborative and individual artwork and in their individual learning journals.

Area 4: Quality of management and leadership for learning

- The quality of management and leadership for learning was very good.
- Clear roles and responsibilities were evident within the team and a clear management structure was in place. A regional manager provided oversight across all four branches of Little Explorers Childcare. A manager and two assistant managers provided hands-on support within the setting on a full-time basis. Room leader roles were assigned to an educator in each learning room.
- Each of the managers and the educators demonstrated a commitment to providing high quality ELC for the children in their care.
- The management team implemented highly effective structures to support quality on an ongoing basis. Branch manager meetings, whole team meetings and room leader meetings were scheduled regularly. Regular support and supervision sessions and annual appraisals were scheduled for all staff members. The manager was also aware of and sought support and information from support agencies, sharing information with the educators and parents as necessary.
- The managers promoted a commitment to participating in continuing professional development (CPD). The manager and two educators had completed the *Leadership for Inclusion* (LINC) *in the Early Years* Programme. Each of the educators had recently completed in-house training related to curriculum planning and observations. While there was evidence of *Aistear* within the settings policies and practice, the managers and educators were in the process of embedding the updated *Aistear* (2024) curriculum framework and updating documentation to reflect it. There was some evidence of the use of the *Aistear, Síolta Practice Guide* to guide their quality development throughout the year.
- Several successful strategies were used to communicate and share information with parents. These included formal meetings between parents and educators, informal daily chats, and noticeboards outside each of the learning rooms. Information was also shared daily using a software application. Regular formal events were scheduled for parents to spend time in the setting such as, Christmas celebrations, a Graduation ceremony and a charity fundraiser.
- Transitions into the setting successfully supported children with settling in by using a child-centred and gradual approach. Parents and children were invited to visit the setting before starting and completed a detailed information form to support the educators to get to know their child. Parents received a welcome pack, a handbook of policies and procedures and were invited to join a software application for receiving and sharing information with the educators and manager.
- Transitions out of the setting were commendably managed. The setting provided school age childcare to children from local primary schools. These children had been invited into the pre-school rooms to discuss school life with the children. The educators used photographs and props to support this and completed the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's (NCCA) *Mo Scéal* reporting templates to share information regarding children's learning and development with the relevant schools.

Action advised

- The educators are advised to engage with the full suite of resources from the *Aistear, Síolta Practice Guide* as an integral part of the cycle of continuous quality development in the setting. Additionally, engagement with professional external training related to *Aistear* (2024) is advised.

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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