An Roinn Oideachais agus Óige
Department of Education and Youth

Early Years Education Inspection (EYEI)

Final Report

Setting name	Footprints Montessori Pre-School
Setting address	Cashelard Ballyshannon County Donegal F94YW73
TUSLA registration number	TU2015DL045
DCEDIY number	10DL0137
Date of inspection	22-10-2025
Date of issue of report	16-12-2025

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	22-10-2025

Activities conducted during the Inspection

- Pre-inspection meeting with the setting owner/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 one Early Childhood Care and Education Programme session
- Interaction with children
- Interaction with early years educators
- Feedback meeting with the setting owner/manager

Context of setting

Footprints Montessori Pre-school is a privately-owned early learning and care setting located in Cashelard, Ballyshannon, County Donegal. The setting offers one morning session each day for children participating in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme. On the day of the inspection, the owner/manager, two early years educator and fourteen children 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 good.
- The owner greeted the parents and children by name at the door of the setting. The educators were warm and caring towards the children and knew them and their families very well.
- The children had the opportunity to choose from a range of Montessori activities, table-top and role-play experiences during the session. The educators had not yet established a consistent, predictable daily routine to support the children's understanding of the sequence of daily activities and their transitions between learning experiences. On the day of the inspection, the rainy weather affected the length of time that the children could spend outside.
- The educators managed transitions using verbal cues and the transition to circle time was supported by a timer as a prompt for the children in the main playroom. These cues limited whole group understanding as not all children received the cues consistently. The transition to snack time was managed effectively using songs and rhymes during circle time to organise the hand washing before snack.
- Snack time was a lovely, sociable experience where the educators sat with the children at each table and conversed about the children's healthy lunches and their personal experiences. The educators encouraged the children effectively to manage their lunches and promoted their self-help skills.
- A key person approach was in place in the setting and the group lists for September and October were displayed on the wall. The manager met with the parents of the children in year two of the ECCE programme, usually after Christmas, to discuss their learning. Each key person completed observations of the children's learning and organised their individual journals.
- The educators represented the children in the learning room using family and pet photographs and an individual photograph on each child's coat hook. The children's group crafts, such as a road safety collage and a few of the children's drawings, were displayed.

- The educators invited some of the parents into the setting to share their skills each year. The postman was a regular visitor to the setting and the children helped to bring in the post. The educators organised an annual outing, to which all parents were invited. They created a visually-appealing display about Australia to reflect the children's real-life experiences in a concrete and meaningful way, including one child's holiday there and a family member who had recently visited one of the children from Australia.

Actions advised

- The educators are advised to develop a daily routine that outlines the sequence of learning experiences available to the children each day. Creating a visual format for the children to follow will support their participation and understanding of transitions further.
- It is advised that the educators strengthen their key person approach by maintaining the same group of key children for the duration of the two-year ECCE programme. This will enhance the relationships established with the children and the parents and provide opportunities for each key person to meet with the parents to discuss each child's learning.
- The educators are advised to further enhance the visual representation of the children in the setting throughout the year by adding more displays of their process artwork and photographs demonstrating their ongoing learning activities and experiences. This will help the children further appreciate their individuality and develop a strong sense of their identity as learners.

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 good.
- The educators had a broad-based curriculum in place that was informed by *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. The educators completed their planning on a fortnightly basis and some of the children's observed interests and comments were noted. It was not clear how the planned activities supported the children's interests and ongoing learning needs.
- The educators had completed a few observations on the children's learning since the beginning of the term. The observations were included in the children's individual journals along with some photographs and drawings. The journals were shared with the parents to take home at the end of each term.
- At times, the educators made good connections between the children's previous learning experiences and new learning through conversations and story time.
- The educators positioned themselves effectively between the two learning rooms to support the children during play activities. The educators commendably demonstrated genuine care and attentiveness in their approach. At times, they used open-ended questions effectively to extend the children's thinking, for example, 'What else could you measure in the room? Have a look around'.
- The indoor learning environment was spacious and consisted of two rooms for the children to use. One room was used primarily for Montessori and table-top play whilst the smaller room contained resources to support role play, a small reading corner, blocks and some small world toys. On the day of the inspection, the sand and water trays that were situated outdoors were not accessible to the children, and paint and playdough activities were not on offer.
- There were two outdoor areas in the setting. The tarred area was used on the day of the inspection. The children used some wheeled vehicles, hoops, balls, plastic tools, bubbles and chalk during their time outdoors. The children engaged outdoors with an educator in an organised and well-facilitated game of 'Mr Wolf'. The second outdoor area had not been used recently as the gate required maintenance. This area contained an outdoor play kitchen, a house, a water tray, a balance beam and tunnel.

- The educators demonstrated effective practices in promoting the children's language and literacy through daily story time, rhymes and songs. They provided the children with useful and developmentally appropriate visual aids to choose which songs and rhymes to sing at circle time. At times, mathematical language was used to support the children's development of concepts such as measurement and number. For example, looking at numbers with a child using a measuring tape and when asking a child if the educator looked bigger or smaller as he looked through magnifying glasses.
- There was an inclusion coordinator appointed in the setting who had completed the Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years training. The educators used the children's personal experiences to promote cultural diversity in the setting.

Actions advised

- It is advised that the educators use their curriculum planning to make connections between the children's observed interests and ongoing learning needs and the planned activities and areas of play.
- The educators are advised to use their interactions with the children to further extend their language and thinking by using open-ended questions and expanding their vocabulary more frequently.
- It is advised that the educators develop the indoor and outdoor learning environments so that there is daily access and availability to sand, water, painting and playdough. Obtaining onsite mentoring support from Better Start Quality Development Service will assist the educators to create defined areas of play across the two indoor learning rooms and two outdoor learning spaces.

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

- The quality of children's learning experiences and achievements was good.
- The children enjoyed playing with the role-play materials. Some children took on roles such as doctors and chefs and used an empty milk carton during play to communicate, 'I've only a little bit of milk left', when making a pie.
- The disco organised and facilitated by the educator towards the end of the session brought a lot of fun to the children. They expressed themselves through dance and stretched and held their peers' hands to mimic jiving as the music played.
- Some children experienced a sense of achievement when completing puzzles independently at the tables or when building the pink tower with support from the educator. Their self-help skills were fostered as they put on and took off their coats and managed their lunches.
- The children's journals contained personal information about their likes, some observations of child and adult-facilitated activities, and their drawings were accompanied by their comments. The observations did not fully reflect the children's holistic learning experiences. The sample journals provided did not demonstrate examples of the children's individual learning progression and achievements throughout the year.
- Many of the children were confident communicators who liked to ask questions and share stories about their personal and family experiences. They talked about their baby siblings, their aunt collecting them and going on holidays during the mid-term break. Some children worked collaboratively during role play and construction, while others required educator support to take turns and to play co-operatively.
- The children had opportunities to get to know some people in their community such as the postman and the parents who visited to share their skills. Meaningful conversations between the children and the educators helped establish links between the children's community and family experiences during the session.

- The educators created a display about Australia to represent the children's personal experiences. The display included a map of the country and photographs of native animals. An educator brought in a pumpkin at circle time to extend a discussion about Halloween.
- Two of the children shared their knowledge of butterflies and moths while completing puzzles during table-top play. There were missed opportunities to extend the children's shared and individual interests further through a wider range of investigative and sensory-rich activities.

Actions advised

- To further support the children to develop their social skills and encourage them to resolve conflict independently, it is advised that the educators provide consistent opportunities for the children to develop an understanding of emotions and an ability to problem solve during times of minor conflict.
- The educators are advised to extend the information about the children's individual learning experiences and achievements in their journals. This will provide a more holistic overview of their learning and progression during their time in the setting.
- To broaden the children's opportunities for exploration and investigation, the educators are advised to provide regular opportunities for the children to experience ICT and multi-sensory activities to progress their shared and individual interests further.

Area 4: Quality of management and leadership for learning

- The quality of management and leadership for learning was good.
- The manager had responsibility for the programme of learning and care in the setting. Some reflection occurred between the manager and the educators during the monthly staff meetings to support the organisation of resources and experiences in the setting.
- The manager had introduced systems such as non-contact time to facilitate the monthly staff meetings and the completion of planning and assessment records.
- The educators worked well as a team and were clear about their roles and responsibilities. The manager offered regular informal support to the educators during daily conversations. At the time of the inspection, there were no formal practices in place to offer consistent support and supervision to the educators.
- The manager provided the parents with a welcome letter when their child started in the setting. The parents provided information about their child's individual preferences and information about their family members to enable the educators to support the children's settling-in period sensitively.
- The manager used an electronic communication application to provide the parents with regular updates about the children's experiences and activities in the setting. The children's journals went home with them on a termly basis for the parents to view.
- The manager provided effective visual supports such as booklets and photographs of the local primary schools to support the children with their transition between educational settings. In previous years, the teacher of junior infants from a local primary school had visited the pre-school to meet with the children. The manager engaged with the principals about the children who were transitioning to school and at times she completed *Mo Scéal* transition reports or parents provided the school with their child's journal.

Actions advised

- The manager is advised to use the monthly staff meetings to embed reflection and self-evaluation practices into the setting. Engaging with Better Start Quality Development Service onsite mentoring support and making frequent use of tools from the *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide* will enhance quality practices within the setting.

- It is advised that the manager develop opportunities to engage with educators on a one-to-one basis for supervision and appraisal. Conducting a training needs analysis through this process will support the staff team's ongoing continuing professional development.
- The manager and key educators are advised to record transition reports for all children availing of year one and year two of the ECCE programme. This will support a collaborative approach between the setting, the parents and the primary school in year two, and will focus on supporting all of the children's next steps and learning needs.

Summary of overall inspection

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