An Roinn Oideachais agus Óige
Department of Education and Youth

Early Years Education Inspection (EYEI)

Final Report

Setting name	Little Learners
Setting address	The Cairn Drumweir Greencastle County Donegal F93K76R
TUSLA registration number	TU2015DL070
DCEDIY number	09DL0120
Date of inspection	18-09-2025
Date of issue of report	09-12-2025

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	18-09-2025

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

Little Learners is a privately-owned early learning and care setting located in Greencastle, County Donegal. The setting offers full day care and 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, one lead educator, one 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.
- A designated educator personally welcomed the children and their parents at the gate of the setting upon arrival. The children were encouraged to hang their coats and bags on their designated hooks and to sign in using their symbol and name.
- The educators were familiar with each child's personality and individual preferences throughout the session.
- The children enjoyed spending time with the educators during snack time. The educators encouraged them to manage their own lunches and supported the development of their self-help skills.
- The educators used verbal and auditory strategies to help the children prepare for transitions. Although a visual routine was displayed, it was not used on the day of the inspection.
- The setting had a key person approach in place and the key groups were displayed on the wall. Each key person was responsible for uploading observations of their key group of children for the parents to view via an online e-storybook application.
- The educators demonstrated a caring approach and used gentle tones of voice during their interactions. They supported the children in being kind and playing co-operatively with their peers. A few children required frequent support during the session to regulate their emotions and to practice turn-taking during play.
- The educators planned community walks with the children and invited the parents and families to Christmas and graduation events in the setting. The children's arts and crafts were displayed in the room and each child had a drawer to store their personal belongings. There was a book of photographs named 'The Story of Us' in the library area for the children to view and reflect on some activities with which they had engaged.

Actions advised

- It is advised that the key person engages in small-group activities with their key group of children. This will support the educators to establish stronger relationships with the children and to support their individual learning and progression.
- The educators are advised to use the setting's managing behaviour policy to develop processes for managing minor conflict between the children. Acknowledging how the children are feeling and offering an opportunity to independently resolve their conflict during play is advised.

- It is advised that the educators make stronger connections between the children, the parents and members of the local community. Following the children's experiences in the community and reflecting them in the learning environment or the planned activities would further deepen their sense of belonging.

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 developed a weekly curriculum plan based on a seasonal theme and activities that focused on helping the children to settle into the setting. The plan incorporated some of the children's interests, such as blocks, playdough, LEGO and ball play. There were limited connections between the children's observed interests, needs and the planned activities.
- The educators used an e-storybook application to record some of the children's activities, including participation in arts and crafts, identifying colours and being the 'star helper'. Some parents engaged with the content by commenting on the uploaded picture stories.
- During the inspection, the educators occasionally encouraged the children to make connections in their learning and supported them, using strategies such as modelling and scaffolding, particularly during tabletop activities.
- The indoor learning environment featured defined play areas, including a home corner, a book area, a calm corner, a writing area and space for tabletop activities.
- The outdoor environment was large and divided into two main areas. Before snack, children accessed the first area, which included water trays, a sand tray, large-scale painting on the fence and opportunities to use shovels and gravel to fill wheelbarrows. After snack, the children accessed the lower area, which offered a mud kitchen, an outdoor classroom and wheeled vehicles.
- The educators supported language development through songs, stories and rhymes. The children engaged in mark-making using Twistables and markers and they created autumn wreaths using ribbon, glue and other craft materials.
- The educators used photographs and sensory resources in the calm area to help the children to regulate their emotions. They used a communication book for children with additional needs to share information between the setting and home. At the time of the inspection, there were no individual inclusion plans or goals in place for children with additional needs.

Actions advised

- It is advised that the educators use the planned activities to progress and extend the children's interests and learning needs. Using a weekly evaluation to establish how the children explored the play areas and to consider their next steps, will support an emergent approach.
- The educators are advised to provide open-ended activities and to extend the children's learning through tailored interactions. Using extended vocabulary and open-ended questions during play will support the children's higher-order thinking and creativity.
- The manager and educators are advised to engage in training that will enhance an inclusive approach in the setting. Developing a collaborative approach with parents around the children's individual learning needs throughout the duration of the ECCE programme is advised.

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

- The quality of children's learning experiences and achievements was good.
- The children enjoyed making autumn wreaths at the craft table. Many children explored lentils and animals in the sensory tray, while others engaged with the sand tray and the magnetic shapes during the session.
- The children enjoyed group painting on large sheets of paper attached to the outdoor fence. The water tray and the 'magic potion' in the outdoor tuff tray attracted much interest. There were limited authentic and open-ended resources across some of the areas in the indoor and outdoor learning environments for the children to extend their play.
- The children accepted the educators' help when completing puzzles and creating wreaths during the planned craft activity. Some children demonstrated kindness and consideration for others during the session. The children were developing an awareness of who they were

as people and the impact of their actions when educators affirmed their kind gestures, making comments such as 'You're a great sister'.
- The information recorded about each child's learning in the online picture stories was generic and did not describe their individual achievements and learning progress. The children had few opportunities to reflect on or consolidate their learning experiences.
- Each child had a portfolio that contained sample arts and crafts completed throughout the year. The scrapbooks went home each term for the parents to view and sign off on. Some of the children's comments were recorded on their art that was displayed in the learning room.
- Some of the children confidently shared stories about their personal experiences, their pets and favourite traits of family members. Many showed good participation and enjoyment during the story and song time.
- The children had opportunities to learn about nature and animals through themed resources in the environment relating to autumn. They had an opportunity each day to care for the pre-school fish. Their knowledge and understanding of the world was mainly guided by adult-chosen topics.

Actions advised

- It is advised that the educators extend opportunities in the environment for the children to explore real-life, authentic and natural materials. Making the play indoors and outdoors areas more inviting, and using processes for self-evaluation to develop this area of practice, is advised.
- The educators are advised to use the children's portfolios and online observations to highlight the children's achievements and how their abilities and interests evolve throughout the ECCE programme. This will support individual reflection on their successes to develop a meaningful approach to recording their learning and development.
- It is advised that the children's individual and shared interests be used to guide the planned experiences and provision of resources in the room. Engaging in digital technology to extend these interests and reflecting with the children around their learning and interests will support them to develop a meaningful understanding of the world.

Area 4: Quality of management and leadership for learning

- The quality of management and leadership for learning was good.
- The manager was responsible for the programme of learning in the setting. She ensured appropriate systems were in place such as planning and the provision of resources to support the organisation of the session.
- The manager provided informal opportunities for the educators to meet and discuss planning as a team.
- The educators completed mandatory training and engaged in training related to the e-storybook application used in the setting. One educator attended an online Better Start sensory processing course.
- Each morning, the manager engaged in conversation with the parents and children on arrival to the setting. The educators used an e-storybook application and social media to communicate with parents about the activities in the setting.
- The manager supported transitions into the setting by providing an open day. This supported the children and parents to familiarise themselves with the educators and the environment. The parents received a welcome pack with information about the setting. The manager provided 'All About Me' forms, which were used to complete each child's profile in the e-storybook application.
- The educators supported the children transitioning to school by taking them on walks to the local primary school. They completed the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment *Mo Scéal* transition report, which was shared with the primary school with parental consent. The manager and educators organised an end-of-year graduation for the children and their families prior to their transition to school.

Actions advised

- The manager is advised to embed processes for reflection and self-evaluation in the setting. Availing of support from Better Start Quality Development Service will support this area of practice and quality improvement in the setting.

- It is advised that the manager establish processes for support and supervision with the educators. Identifying training needs and encouraging the educators to participate in ongoing continuing professional development is advised.
- The manager is advised to develop processes for the key person to engage in formal meetings with the parents at the end of year one and year two of the ECCE programme. This will support the establishment of the children's next steps in learning and develop a partnered approach to their learning and progression.

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

Published December 2025/ Foilsithe Nollaig 2025