

Report of a Pilot Inspection
Apple Blossom Pre-school Playgroup, Crossgar

November 2023



Contents

1. INTRODUCTION	1
A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION	1
B. VIEWS OF PARENTS AND STAFF	1
C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION.....	1
2. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS	2
3. MAIN REPORT	3
A. SETTING THE VISION	3
B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION	3
C. BUILDING EQUITY	4
D. EMBEDDING SUCCESS	4
E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING.....	5
F. CHILD PROTECTION	5
4. GOING FORWARD	5

1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Apple Blossom Pre-school Playgroup is located in a purpose-built modular building in the village of Crossgar in County Down. There are currently twenty-one children attending the part-time session, a small number of whom have special educational needs (SEN). The children come from the village and surrounding rural area of Crossgar and almost all transfer to the adjoining primary school.

There is a well-established team in the pre-school, comprising of the longstanding leader, deputy leader and two assistants. An independent early years specialist (EYS) has been supporting the setting for almost two years. There is a tradition of senior leaders from the adjoining school providing support to the pre-school through their membership of the management committee; recruitment of additional members onto the management committee has been challenging for a number of years.

There is a warm, welcoming and inclusive ethos in the pre-school which is characterised by the commitment of all staff to ensure each child has equitable access to resources and learning experiences across all areas of the pre-school curriculum.

B. VIEWS OF PARENTS AND STAFF

Almost one-half (9) of the parents responded to the online confidential questionnaire and a small of those who responded also included written comments, all of which were wholly positive and praised the quality of their child's experiences at the pre-school and the approachable, warm and welcoming staff. All of the staff responded to the questionnaire; their responses were also wholly positive in regard to the work of the pre-school. Most of the staff included written comments, in which they each expressed their frustration and concern regarding the lack of funding and resourcing in the voluntary pre-school sector.

C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) worked alongside the pre-school to consider how well the pre-school:

- has identified and articulates its vision;
- prioritises actions to achieve the vision;
- overcomes the main challenges it faces;
- monitors and reviews progression to identify, celebrate and embed success; and
- grows and develops an inclusive community of learning.

2. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

- All staff are committed to their agreed vision of providing a warm, happy, caring and safe environment in which the children feel confident and are able to think for themselves, make their own choices and direct their own learning.
- Almost all of the children are making good or very good progress in their learning across all areas of the pre-school curriculum.
- The development planning process is underpinned by regular reflective practice and a commitment to continuous improvement in the best interests of the children. There is a need, however, to formalise the process of self-evaluation and improve the supporting action plans to inform and guide more effectively the process of improvement.
- The staff have introduced recently a revised and more efficient approach to planning, observation and assessment which reflects the pre-school curricular guidance and in which the voice of the child is central. They have identified, through ongoing reflection, the need to use more effectively the observations of children's learning to inform the short-term planning.
- The staff have prioritised their professional learning to facilitate a curiosity-based approach within the setting. They nurture the development of the children's curiosity and creativity through their skilful interactions and the wide range of interesting and authentic resources in the playroom.
- The pre-school has established strong and supportive partnerships with: parents and families; the adjoining primary school; the local community; other pre-school settings; and their EYS.
- The arrangements for child protection take account of current child protection guidance.

Areas for further consideration:

- To formalise the self-evaluation and development planning process to inform and guide more effectively the process of improvement.
- To use more effectively the observations of children's learning to inform the short-term planning and ensure continued progression in learning for all children.
- To update a small number of safeguarding policies in line with current guidance from the Department of Education.

3. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

Apple Blossom Pre-school Playgroup is committed to their vision of providing a warm, happy, caring and safe environment in which the children feel confident and are able to think for themselves, make their own choices and direct their own learning.

The development planning process is informed by regular reflective practice and a shared commitment to continuous improvement in the best interests of the children. The staff can articulate clearly: their rationale for identifying previous and current priorities for improvement; the actions taken to achieve the desired improvements; and the subsequent positive impact on the children's learning experiences and outcomes. There is a need, however, to formalise the process of self-evaluation and development planning to ensure it is more consistent and robust and that targets for improvement are more specific and measurable.

The longstanding partnership with the adjoining primary school provides regular support and guidance to the pre-school with aspects of leadership and management, including for example, recruitment and appointment of staff, and child protection and safeguarding matters. Through attendance at various events in the primary school and opportunities to meet foundation stage staff, the children from the pre-school and their families become familiar with the school and the staff which supports the children's transition to Year 1.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

The staff have prioritised over recent years the development of a curiosity-based approach to the children's learning experiences in the pre-school. They have developed their knowledge and understanding of this approach through engaging in research and professional learning, working with their EYS and visiting other settings. This has led to the staff making changes to the physical environment, including changing the colour scheme in the playroom, reorganising the layout of the room to increase the children's accessibility to resources, and gradually introducing a more extensive selection of natural, authentic and high-interest resources. All staff have embraced this approach and are proud of the positive impact these changes are having on the children's learning experiences and progress. In addition, the staff nurture further the development of the children's curiosity and creativity through their skilful interactions with them during play.

There are strengths in the provision across all areas of the pre-school curriculum. A more efficient approach to planning, observations and assessment was introduced at the beginning of the previous academic year to reduce the administrative workload and support staff wellbeing. Half-termly planning for learning is informed by meaningful observations and evaluations of the children's progress across the curriculum. Although the staff respond effectively to the children's opinions and interests to guide the provision on a daily basis, they have identified appropriately, through ongoing reflection, the need to review their approach to planning and use more effectively the formal observations of children's learning to inform the short-term planning and monitor the children's learning.

The staff are caring and pastoral in all of their interactions with the children. An appropriate range of child protection and safeguarding policies are in place to support the staff to keep the children safe; the complaints policy and the codes of conduct for both staff and visitors however require reviewing and minor updates to reflect more accurately the high-quality practice in the setting.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

The well-considered layout of both the indoor playroom and the outdoor area, and the accessibility to a wide range of authentic resources, facilitate equity and inclusion for all children. The staff, on the advice of an educational psychologist, in partnership with parents and based on their own self-reflection, reviewed and amended aspects of the organisation of the day to reduce specific barriers faced by individual children and to ensure, as much as possible, equity of access to the pre-school curriculum, resources and accommodation.

Individual education plans (IEPs), which have been developed through close liaison with parents, and other professionals where appropriate, are in place to support the small number of children with SEN. Effective strategies and interventions are used consistently by all staff and, as a result, the children with SEN are making good progress in their learning and development. The staff have identified appropriately that the quality of the targets within the IEPs is variable and should be more specific and measurable in order to provide a more robust record of the progress that the children are making.

D. EMBEDDING SUCCESS

Almost all of the children engage in high-quality, collaborative and creative play in both the indoor and outdoor learning environments. They explore with curiosity and intrigue the range of interesting and authentic resources, including real food, mirrors, magnets and the selection of paints at the mixing station. The children are also developing well their investigative and problem-solving skills as they sustain play for extended periods at the role-play, water and construction areas.

Almost all of the children follow with ease the well-established routines and transitions of the day and proudly take on the role and responsibility of 'Helper of the Day'. They are developing friendships, are respectful and supportive of each other, and are aware of their responsibility to care for their resources and environment, including feeding, caring for and collecting the eggs from the chickens that they keep outdoors. The children's balance, co-ordination and physical skills of running, climbing and throwing are also developing well as they play together with each other and use the range of equipment and resources outdoors with confidence.

The staff listen attentively to the children. They know each child's strengths and interests and build on these to provide interesting and appropriately challenging individualised learning experiences for the children. The staff share and celebrate the children's work and achievements through the attractive displays in the playroom, the collation of scrapbooks and with parents via a digital platform.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

The staff are committed to the holistic development of each child in the pre-school and have invested their own personal time building an understanding and appreciation of how to facilitate a curiosity-based approach to the provision. They have built effective partnerships with other settings and with their EYS as part of their professional learning journey and were selected by the EYS to showcase their provision to other settings; an event which was highly praised by all who attended.

The pre-school also values the support of the local community and acknowledges the positive impact that their partnerships with local businesses, health care providers and the adjoining primary school are having on the children's learning experiences and on the quality of the overall provision in the pre-school.

F. CHILD PROTECTION

At the time of the inspection, the evidence provided by the pre-school demonstrates that the arrangements for child protection take account of the Department of Education's (DE) current guidance.

4. GOING FORWARD

Apple Blossom Pre-school Playgroup provides a warm, happy, caring and safe environment in which the children feel confident and are able to think for themselves, make their own choices and direct their own learning. The children's curiosity and creativity are prioritised through the staff's skilful interactions and the well-considered learning environment.

The inspection has highlighted areas for further consideration which will support the pre-school in achieving its vision and continue to effect improvement. These include the need to: formalise the self-evaluation and development planning process; and use more effectively the observations of children's learning to inform the short-term planning.

An aspect of effective practice in this pre-school which should be shared more widely is:

- the attention given to the development of the children's curiosity and creativity through the staff's skilful interactions and the effective use of a wide range of interesting and authentic resources in the playroom.

The Education and Training Inspectorate

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