

Report of a Pilot Inspection  
Harbour Bears Pre-school, Larne

January 2024



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# **1. INTRODUCTION**

## **A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Harbour Bears Pre-school is a voluntary cross community pre-school located within the harbour area of Larne in County Antrim. The pre-school is based in a shared bowling pavilion and the children have access to their own enclosed outdoor play area. The staff utilise a large park area to provide the children with opportunities to take part in energetic play and to develop their physical skills. The children also have access to a shared community garden where they grow and maintain planting areas with a local primary school.

There are currently 15 children of pre-school age attending the part-time session, of whom a small number of children have speech, language and communication difficulties. All of the children come from the locality and surrounding area of Larne, with almost all of the children transferring to four local primary schools. The pre-school has a newly established staff team consisting of a leader, deputy leader who is also the special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCo) and an assistant. The management committee has a stable core leadership team, with new parents joining annually to support the pre-school. An early years specialist (EYS) has recently started working with the staff.

The ethos of the pre-school is to work in partnership with the parents and community to provide an inclusive environment that creates a positive start for children on their journey to lifelong learning.

## **B. VIEWS OF PARENTS AND STAFF**

Just over one-half of the parents/carers (8) and all of the staff responded to the online confidential questionnaires. A small number of parents and staff also included written comments, all of which were wholly positive and were shared by inspectors with the staff and management committee. The staff reported that the new team have established good relationships with each other and support each other well. The parents spoke of how their children are excited and happy to attend the pre-school and they are making progress in their learning.

In discussions with a small number of parents, they articulated how they feel confident leaving their child in the pre-school with the nurturing and caring staff. They reported that the staff are approachable and help them to support their child with their learning and development at home.

## **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**

- The pre-school vision has been reviewed recently, is well supported by management, staff and parents and aims to provide a friendly and inclusive environment for all children so they make progress in their learning.
- The newly established staff team are working collegially and engaging in self-evaluation to identify appropriately the priorities for development. There is a need for more strategic and robust self-evaluation to ensure that action plans are manageable and achievable in the desired time frame.
- Long-, medium- and short-term planning is strategic and informed by meaningful consultation with children and takes account of their interests. The staff use their detailed and regular observations and assessments to inform effectively the future planning and meet the needs of individual children.
- The personal, social and emotional development of all the children is a key strength. The children demonstrate very good levels of independence during the sessions and engage in sustained periods of concentration at play. Their behaviour is very good and their social skills are developing well.
- The caring and nurturing approach of the staff supports the children's confidence and the use of open questioning by the staff in best practice, extends the children's learning and development. There are missed opportunities to develop and extend fully the children's creativity and curiosity within the areas of learning of the Arts and the World Around Us.
- The staff have established strong relationships with parents, local businesses and the four local primary schools to support a smooth transition from pre-school to Year 1 for the children and which impacts positively on all aspects of provision.
- Further professional learning and clustering with other pre-school settings has been identified by the staff as a priority going forward, with the additional support of the early years specialist.
- The arrangements for child protection align to the current Department of Education (DE) guidance.

Areas for further consideration:

- To develop further the processes of self-evaluation and action planning.
- To extend further the children's imagination, investigative and thinking skills in the areas of learning of the Arts and World Around Us.

### **3. MAIN REPORT**

#### **A. SETTING THE VISION**

The recently appointed staff team and management are committed to the setting's revised vision of an inclusive and respectful learning environment that enables children to be happy and grow in confidence on their educational journey. The management committee is supportive of the staff's proactive approach to develop their professional learning and have sought early years specialist support so that the staff can access training, collaborate and share practice with other pre-school settings.

The staff team are working collegially and engaging in self-evaluation to identify appropriately priorities for development. The staff will benefit from further support and guidance from the early years specialist to develop a more strategic and robust three-year development plan which outlines clearly their priorities for each year and provides the necessary detail on how the impact on the children's learning and development on actions taken will be measured.

The well-established management committee is invested in the sustainability of the pre-school and have successfully secured new premises which will provide staff with their own pre-school building. The members of the management committee use their professional skillset to support proactively the staff and are involved in numerous fundraising activities and initiatives. A newly appointed early years specialist is supporting effectively the staff and providing further access to training and sharing of best practice between pre-school settings.

#### **B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION**

The staff exhibit consistently high levels of pastoral care, positivity, and nurturing approaches towards the children which promotes the children's learning, confidence and independence. The staff have identified appropriately the need to reflect on their provision across all areas of the pre-school curriculum to ensure that each child receives the necessary support and resources for their learning and progression. The well-defined play areas, with a range of accessible resources, provide the children with the opportunity to extend their play and develop further their interests which could be exploited further by the staff during their interactions with the children. The designated outdoor area has a variety of authentic resources and the community garden and forest area provide the children with well-planned opportunities to foster their curiosity and exploration in natural surroundings which are scaffolded effectively by the staff to meet each child's learning needs.

Long-, medium- and short-term planning is strategic and informed by meaningful consultation with the children and takes account of their interests. The staff have developed effectively the cycle of planning, observation and assessment and are using a digital application (app) to monitor the progress of each child and to identify the next steps in their learning to inform future planning. In the areas of learning of the Arts and World Around Us, there are missed opportunities to extend consistently the children's curiosity and problem-solving skills.

The children have access to a range of digital devices which they use independently and effectively to develop their knowledge, language and fine motor skills. They use digital technology to take pictures of their creations at construction activities and use educational software on digital devices to enhance their learning experiences.

Health and wellbeing is promoted in the pre-school through healthy eating and energetic play in the large outdoor shared area. All safeguarding policies detail clearly how staff adopt and implement appropriate procedures to ensure the children are safe and happy in the pre-school. The staff encourage the children to talk about their feelings and use a range of puppets, books and props to recognise and assist with self-regulation and to show empathy for others.

### **C. BUILDING EQUITY**

The staff recognise and support effectively the needs and abilities of each child. They reflect on the children's background and experiences, incorporating materials and activities that celebrate diversity and promote cultural understanding. Families are engaged in the learning process and are encouraged to support their children's development through the use of home learning packs.

Individual education plans (IEPs) are in place to support a small number of children who are on the SEN register with speech, language and communication difficulties. While the staff have identified appropriately targets for these children, there is a need to make them more specific and measurable to ensure the children have sufficient opportunity to celebrate their successes in their learning.

### **D. EMBEDDING SUCCESS**

The children are very well-settled and navigate effortlessly the daily routines and transitions. Their personal, social and emotional skills are very well developed for the time of year; they all display positive attitudes towards learning and engage actively in play with happiness and confidence. Most children display high levels of concentration and perseverance and sustain play for extended periods of time at activities such as the home corner, tuff spot and water play. Children demonstrate very good respect for their peers, adults, resources, and environment.

The children express themselves openly, articulating the connections with their own prior experiences and their interests. Some children are becoming aware of the significance of written words, utilising resources such as clipboards to write letters of the alphabet, recognise the names of their peers and beginning to spell their own name. They participate eagerly in story time, songs and outdoor musical activities.

The staff foster a supportive and nurturing learning environment where children feel valued and respected. They use positive reinforcement, praise, and constructive feedback to motivate children and build their self-confidence and self-esteem. The staff know the children well; they recognise and celebrate the unique strengths, interests and needs of the children. They encourage the children to have an input into their learning through a 'monthly choice board' so they can decide on the topic of learning which informs appropriately the short-term planning.

#### **E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING**

Through consistent pastoral care, positive reinforcement, and nurturing interactions, the staff create a conducive environment for learning and growth. Central to the pre-school's ethos is the active involvement of parents. The staff foster strong partnerships with parents/carers and families, as well as local schools and businesses, to support children's learning both at home and at pre-school. They help parents to engage actively in their child's learning by communicating regularly with them through the pre-school website, newsletters, questionnaires, progress meetings and on a closed social media platform.

The parents reported that the pre-school has a very good reputation within the community. The staff build strong links with the community by: engaging in planting flowers with the local garden centre; organising various fundraising events; and participating in the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations which was attended by past and present members as the longest serving pre-school in Larne. The pre-school has also supported their local community by fundraising to buy a defibrillator for use within the whole community.

The staff have established strong links with four local primary schools; throughout the year, the children from both the pre-school and primary share learning sessions in the primary schools and participate in joint activities in the outdoor forest area and community garden. This relationship assists with the smooth transition to Year 1 for the pre-school children.

#### **F. CHILD PROTECTION**

At the time of the inspection, the evidence provided by the pre-school demonstrates that the arrangements for child protection align to the current statutory guidance.

### **4. GOING FORWARD**

The new staff team have established a collaborative vision for an inclusive learning environment that provides foundations for the children to flourish during their pre-school experience and is impacting positively on all the children at Harbour Bears Pre-school. The nurturing staff team have created a homely environment, with the learning led by the children's interests and choices.

The inspection has highlighted some areas for further consideration which will support the pre-school in achieving its vision. This includes the development of the self-evaluation process and extending the children's learning and skills in the areas of learning of the Arts and World Around Us. ETI will monitor the progress of Harbour Bears Pre-school in addressing the areas for further consideration as laid out in this report.

Inspectors identified an aspect of highly effective practice from which others may learn. The aspect of practice which should be shared more widely is:

- the consistent promotion by staff to develop the children's independence and social skills which enable the children to be confident in their learning.



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