

Report of a Pilot Inspection
Mallusk Community Playgroup

February 2024



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1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Mallusk Community Playgroup is a voluntary playgroup located in a modular unit classroom in the grounds of Academy Sports Club, Mallusk. There is a playroom and an outdoor area which provides space for the children to take part in exploratory and investigative play. The children also use regularly the hall of the Academy Sports Club when participating in a range of physical activities and extra-curricular opportunities such as “Fun with Drums”. Twenty-two pre-school children attend a part-time session and mainly come from the Mallusk area, with a small number coming from the wider urban area. Most of the children transfer to the local primary school. Fourteen percent of the children have been identified as having special educational needs (SEN) and 5% of the children have English as an additional language.

There is a well-established playgroup team comprising of a leader, deputy, and four assistants, including two SEN assistants. An early years specialist (EYS) has recently started working with the staff.

The positive ethos of the playgroup promotes the vision for each child’s right to be valued, listened to and make progress in a caring, welcoming and inclusive environment.

B. VIEWS OF PARENTS AND STAFF

Ninety-one per cent (20) of parents responded to the confidential online questionnaire and just under two-thirds provided additional written comments in support of the playgroup. All of the responses were very positive. The parents reported that the very approachable, caring staff are highly committed to helping their child to grow in confidence and to develop independence. They value the very inclusive nature of the playgroup, the supportive and pastoral staff and the regular communication.

Inspectors also met with a small number of parents during the inspection. The parents praised how the playgroup staff meet the needs of their child and reported on the good progress their child is making. They appreciate the staff modelling strategies for them to help their child engage with stories in an enjoyable and interactive way.

All of the staff responded positively to the online questionnaire and provided written comments. They commented on the excellent staff relationships, the collegial working and how they feel very valued in their role.

C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION

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

- 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 playgroup staff share a collaborative vision to provide a nurturing, highly inclusive environment that supports all of the children to make progress, acquire life skills, and positive dispositions for learning.
- The staff are using effectively a tailored process for short-, medium- and long-term planning, providing high quality learning opportunities for all children in the setting.
- The strong and collaborative approach to the cycle of self-evaluation is robust and leads to improvement.
- The development of the children's personal, social and emotional (PSE) skills impacts positively on their high levels of independence which are supported effectively by skilful staff interactions.
- The small outdoor play area is resourced creatively to provide high quality, open-ended learning opportunities for the children.
- The needs of the children with SEN are met effectively through detailed planning, observation and consistent implementation of strategies and support from key workers.
- Professional learning and development impacts positively on the staff's capacity to support children's individual needs.
- Communication with parents is consistent through the use of a digital app and regular newsletters which are valued highly by the parents. The playgroup's 'open-door' policy provides good opportunities for parents to observe their children at play.
- The playgroup has strong links with the local community and primary schools which provide positive shared learning experiences that are developing further the children's knowledge, curiosity and investigative skills.
- Inclusion and diversity within the playgroup is a key strength where all cultures are recognised and valued.

Area for action:

- To ensure the management committee undertake relevant up-to-date child protection training to support them in their role.

3. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

The staff of Mallusk Community Playgroup share a collaborative vision to provide a nurturing, highly inclusive environment that provides opportunities for each child to develop life skills and progression across all areas of the pre-school curriculum. The vision is reviewed and adapted every year to ensure it meets the needs of each new cohort of children. This vision is at the heart of the work of the playgroup and underpins all of the key decisions made.

The staff have created a strong culture of self-evaluation. They skilfully reflect on their practice and on the progression of children which informs appropriate priorities for improvement through the development planning process.

The management committee is supportive of the work of the playgroup and is well informed by the leader. The newly appointed early years specialist (EYS) provides effective support which is linked to the priorities within the development plan.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

The planning within the playgroup provides suitably challenging opportunities for learning across all areas of the pre-school curriculum. There is progression in the planned activities which enables the children to extend their own learning. The planning takes appropriate account of the individual developmental needs of the children. The staff use effectively their observations of the children's learning to inform future planning.

The consistently skilful interactions of all the staff impact positively on the children's learning experiences. The staff are intuitive to the needs of the children and communicate effectively with the children to expand their thinking skills and vocabulary. The staff praise the children's work, and value and share regularly the children's achievements with their parents.

The staff are developing the children's digital skills using a wide range of appropriate digital resources. The children confidently take photographs, use tablet devices and desktops to play mathematical games.

The wellbeing of children and staff is cultivated through a kind, caring, nurturing ethos and a strong sense of community. The children are supported and encouraged to develop a healthy lifestyle by participating in safe energetic play, provided with nutritious foods at snack, and practising good hygiene and self-care. Posters and wall displays reinforce healthy lifestyle messages. An appropriate range of child protection and safeguarding policies, and risk assessments are in place to support the staff to keep the children safe.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

Continuous professional development is highly valued by all of the staff. They have proactively sourced specific courses through Belfast Metropolitan College's 'Skill Up' programme to help them meet the increasingly complex and diverse needs of the children. The external training courses, in areas such as autism awareness, SENCO training and 'Makaton' are impacting positively on the strategies and approaches used by the staff to support children with their learning.

The staff are responsive to the children's individual needs and utilise successfully resources and strategies to support children with SEN, such as a visual timetable and a 'Now and Then' board. The individual education plans (IEPs) for children with SEN are detailed and outline clearly the targets and strategies necessary to support the children and aid their progression. Suitable and well-considered planning is also in place for those children who require extended challenge in their activities.

The staff have created a stimulating indoor and outdoor learning environment, where the learning opportunities meet the needs, interests and abilities of all of the children. The addition of a sensory room within the playroom provides a calming, nurturing and safe space for children to use to help them in regulating their emotions. The creative provision and planning for outdoor learning ignites the children's imaginations and promotes curiosity and investigative play. Excellent use is made of the limited available space to facilitate the children's learning through exploring and experimenting. For example, the children bird watch, grow and water plants and vegetables, and engage in role play in their outdoor shop and in the builder's yard.

Opportunities for PSE development are extended creatively and thoughtfully in the outdoor area, with an 'emotions' area and a tribute garden where the children can spend quiet time in a peaceful and unique environment. The well-resourced outdoor library provides opportunities for the children to enjoy books outdoors on their reading bench and the writing area is enjoyed by children as they plan menus for their mud kitchen. The views of the children are valued and acted upon; for example, the culture of 'reduce, reuse, recycle' is embedded in the playgroup as a response to the children's interest in recycling.

D. EMBEDDING SUCCESS

All of the children are making very good progress in their learning, are well settled and follow the routines and transitions with ease. They are highly motivated learners; they display very good levels of concentration and play purposefully for sustained periods of time. Almost all of the children have very good levels of independence and their self-management skills are well-established.

The children's fine- and gross- motor skills are very well-developed; almost all of the children demonstrate advanced mark making skills and their representational drawings are of a very good quality.

Nearly all of the children are articulate speakers who engage confidently with their peers and enjoy sharing their own personal experiences. The children can express their own opinions and challenge each other in a respectful and inclusive manner.

Their role play skills are very good and, through assuming a variety of roles in the doctor's surgery, the children demonstrate high levels of understanding and empathy.

The children use a wide range of early mathematical language naturally and confidently through their play and during snack, for example, when participating in number rhymes, songs and games.

All of the children respond positively to the staff's high expectations and nurturing approach. A wide range of strategies and interventions are employed skilfully and effectively to help children to manage their own emotions and behaviour.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

The playgroup has established positive relationships with the local community, providing excellent opportunities to enrich the children's learning experiences. Local businesses sponsor the playgroup and have provided funding to design a personalised map for the outdoor play area which includes many local landmarks. It is used effectively for many purposes, including, developing the children's local knowledge of the world around them, developing mathematical language and providing opportunities for role play. Very good use is made of volunteer visitors to the setting to enhance the children's learning, including visits from a local farmer, dentist, fire service and dog handlers from the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

There are strong links with the local primary schools, for example, the children from the playgroup avail of the services of the local primary school's breakfast club and there is an effective transition programme for the playgroup children into Year 1.

Parental engagement in the life and work of the playgroup is encouraged and there is an 'open-door' policy which provides good opportunities for parents to observe their children at play outdoors. Cultural diversity is embraced and celebrated within the playgroup and all events are inclusive of all members of the community.

The staff prioritise and value professional learning which is linked strategically to the individual needs of the children within the playgroup. There is a culture of the sharing of professional learning among the team to empower all staff to use strategies which ensures consistency for the children. The early years specialist contributes effectively to the development of internal staff professional learning.

F. CHILD PROTECTION

At the time of the inspection, the evidence provided by the playgroup demonstrates that the arrangements for child protection align to the current statutory guidance. Further work is necessary to ensure the management committee undertake relevant up-to-date child protection training to support them in their role. The ETI will monitor the progress of the playgroup in addressing this area for action.

4. GOING FORWARD

Mallusk Community Playgroup has an inclusive and strategic vision which is effective in meeting the needs of all the children. Through collaborative working, the prioritisation of professional learning and excellent links with the local community, the playgroup provides a nurturing, stimulating and creative environment where all children are making very good progress.

ETI will continue to work with Mallusk Community Playgroup, including to share examples of highly effective practice from which others may learn. The aspects of practice which should be shared more widely include:

- the strategic approach to professional learning and development to specifically meet the needs of all children; and
- the creative and innovative use of a small outdoor space, to promote creativity and imagination across the areas of the pre-school curriculum.

Mallusk Community Playgroup is well placed to take forward the area for action detailed in this report.

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