

**Report of a Pilot Inspection**  
Rasharkin Community Playgroup, Ballymena

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 .....	2
A. SETTING THE VISION .....	2
B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION .....	3
C. BUILDING EQUITY .....	3
D. EMBEDDING SUCCESS .....	4
E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING.....	4
F. CHILD PROTECTION .....	5
4. GOING FORWARD .....	5

# **1. INTRODUCTION**

## **A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Rasharkin Community Playgroup is a voluntary playgroup located in a purpose-built building in Rasharkin, near Ballymoney in County Antrim. It comprises a playroom, outdoor soft play area and a garden. The 17 children attending the playgroup for a single part-time session come mainly from the local village, with a small number coming from the surrounding rural areas. Six percent of the children have been identified as having special educational needs (SEN) and 12% of the children have English as an additional language. The leader is supported by a deputy and an assistant.

The playgroup has a positive inclusive ethos that encourages all children to develop and flourish in a nurturing environment, preparing them for their next stage of learning. The playgroup is partnered with another playgroup in Dervock, through a 'Sharing from the Start' project, which is supported by the European Union's PEACE IV Programme and involves children in the early years sector throughout Northern Ireland and the border counties taking part in *Shared Education* programmes.

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

Eighty-two percent (14) of the parents/carers responded to the confidential online questionnaire. All of the responses were highly positive, indicating that their child is very happy attending the playgroup and is making good progress. All parents/carers report that the staff have informed them about their child's learning activities in the playgroup and have suggested how they can help their child with their learning at home. Approximately two-thirds of the parents/carers who responded to the questionnaire (10) provided additional written comments reporting on, in particular, the very friendly, accommodating staff and the excellent regular communication they receive from the playgroup.

Inspectors also met with a small number of parents during the inspection who spoke highly of the caring staff and expressed their appreciation of how well the staff helped their child to settle into the playgroup.

All of the staff responded to the confidential questionnaire. Their responses include a small number of written comments which were entirely positive. The staff reported that they: enjoy working at the playgroup; feel respected; and appreciate opportunities to work closely with the local community to enhance the children's learning experiences.

## **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 staff have created a stimulating, nurturing, inclusive environment which supports effectively the playgroup's child-centred vision for all children to be happy and to thrive in their learning.
- The children are independent and engage in sustained investigative play with confidence, perseverance and maturity.
- The staff know all of the children very well and plan a wide range of challenging activities which incorporate the children's ideas and interests, leading to progression in all aspects of their learning.
- The interactions of all staff are highly effective. They engage actively in the children's play and model language skilfully to develop and extend the children's vocabulary across the six areas of the pre-school curriculum.
- The children are acquiring appropriate skills, attitudes and dispositions which are preparing them well for the next stage of their learning.
- The collegial approach of the staff to self-evaluation and development planning is effective and leads to continuous improvement for the children's progression.
- The arrangements for child protection and safeguarding take account of current child protection guidance.

Areas for further consideration:

- To review and update the Positive Behaviour Policy in line with guidance from the Department of Education (DE).

## **3. MAIN REPORT**

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

The playgroup's child-centred vision is articulated well by the staff who work effectively as a team to support all of the children in becoming independent, curious and happy learners within a nurturing inclusive environment.

The management committee are well informed about the work of the playgroup and have a good understanding of the content of the development plan and associated action plans. They value, understand the rationale for and are very supportive of the staff's professional learning.

The approaches for self-evaluation and development planning are effective. The staff work well as a team and are very reflective in their practice. They proactively consult parents taking account of their views to identify appropriate priorities leading to continuous improvement.

The early years specialist (EYS) supports and enhances the work of the staff to develop their understanding of the processes of self-evaluation and in particular action planning.

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

All of the staff are highly committed to providing high quality, challenging learning experiences for the children. The staff are proactive in seeking professional learning opportunities which develop their knowledge and confidence, enabling them to better meet the individual needs of all of the children.

The staff provide very good opportunities for the children to explore, investigate, and experiment in their natural environment which is very well resourced and stimulating. They model language skilfully and use a range of questioning techniques and visual prompts to promote and extend the children's vocabulary across all areas of the pre-school curriculum.

The staff plan a varied programme of learning throughout the year that reflects appropriately the children's ideas and interests and ensures progression across all areas of the pre-school curriculum. The staff know the children extremely well; they use effectively their observations and assessments of the children's progress to inform future short-term planning.

The children's health and wellbeing is prioritised through healthy eating, energetic play and keeping safe during outdoor play, with the use of balancing equipment and apparatus. Healthy lifestyle messages are promoted and reinforced through posters, songs and action rhymes for the children when they are washing their hands and brushing their teeth. The staff give priority to keeping the children safe and there are an appropriate range of safeguarding policies in place. Safeguarding could be improved further by reviewing the Positive Behaviour Policy.

## **C. BUILDING EQUITY**

The nurturing, inclusive culture within the playgroup is evidenced through the staff's response in meeting effectively the children's diverse needs. The staff are flexible in their teaching approaches, providing a range of suitable methods and adjustments to support the children's successful integration during play sessions. Individualised tailored provision, in the playroom and outdoor areas, meets effectively the needs of the children. However, the targets in the individual education plans for children with SEN should be more specific to enable the staff to measure more effectively the children's progress.

## **D. EMBEDDING SUCCESS**

For the time of year, all of the children are making very good progress across all areas of the pre-school curriculum and are developing positive attitudes and dispositions for learning. The personal, social and emotional development of the children is a key strength, and the children engage confidently with staff and visitors, take pride in their learning and enjoy celebrating and discussing their achievements.

All of the children are independent learners who spend lengthy periods at self-chosen play, building effectively on their ideas and interests. They select resources and equipment with ease to extend further their learning. Most of the children have high levels of perseverance; they engage in investigative, exploratory play making relevant observations and ask pertinent questions to extend their thinking.

Nearly all of the children have very well-developed fine and gross motor skills. They use confidently a wide range of equipment including kitchen utensils, keys, locks, switches and authentic gardening tools safely with precision and skill. Most of the children have very good balance, control and coordination as they climb skilfully, use logs as balance beams, and play hopscotch.

All of the children listen attentively to stories and most enjoy looking at books in small groups or independently, researching the birds that they feed on the bird table. Most of the children have a keen interest in music and participate enthusiastically in singing and performing using their self-crafted shakers and drums.

Almost all of the children have an interest in, and a good understanding of, all early mathematical concepts, and most integrate very naturally mathematical language into their play. The children: monitor and discuss the speed and distance travelled by toy cars using guttering at different heights; name shapes accurately; and count vegetables when making soup.

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

The staff are cultivating productive partnerships with the parents which are having a positive impact on the children's learning at home, through an increased interest in music, books and stories. The parents are informed of the work within the playgroup through monthly newsletters, and the recent introduction of a digital application (app) to share the children's daily progress.

There are well-established links between the playgroup and the local primary schools which support effectively the transition of the children to their next stage of learning. The staff appreciate opportunities to visit other local playgroups and primary schools and have improved their outdoor play provision as a result. External providers have been used successfully within the setting to enrich the learning experiences for the children and to build the capacity of the staff in delivering music provision.

## **F. CHILD PROTECTION**

At the time of the inspection, the evidence provided by the playgroup demonstrates that the arrangements for child protection take account of the DE's current child protection guidance.

## **4. GOING FORWARD**

Rasharkin Community Playgroup has a well-embedded strategic vision to meet the needs of all of the children in a nurturing, motivating and inclusive learning environment. The staff are very intuitive to the needs of the children and provide stimulating high quality learning experiences that reflect the children's interests.

The inspection has highlighted an area for further action which will support the playgroup in achieving its vision.

Aspects of effective practice in this playgroup which should be shared more widely are the:

- consistently high-quality levels of engagement between the staff and the children; and
- teaching approaches used by the staff to develop the children's fine and gross motor skills.

# The Education and Training Inspectorate

© CROWN COPYRIGHT 2024

This report may be reproduced in whole or in part, except for commercial purposes or in connection with a prospectus or advertisement, provided that the source and date thereof are stated.

Copies of this report are available on the [ETI website](#)

Follow us on  [@ETI\\_news](#)  [@ETInews](#) 



The Education and Training Inspectorate  
Empowering Improvement

Providing inspection services for:

Department of Education  
Department for the Economy  
and other commissioning Departments

