St. Mary's School
Day Care of Children

Stable Block
St Mary's School
Abbey Park
Melrose
TD6 9LN

Telephone: 01896 822 517

Type of inspection:
Unannounced

Completed on:
5 May 2026

Service provided by:
St. Mary's School, Melrose

Service provider number:
SP2003003590

Service no:
CS2003016201

About the service

St. Mary's School Kindergarten is registered to provide a care service to a maximum of 30 children at any one time between the ages of 18 months to not yet attending primary school, of whom no more than six are under two years old.

The Kindergarten is situated within a converted stable block within the grounds of St. Mary's School in the town of Melrose, close to local shops and amenities. The service operates from two rooms and also has the use of the adjoining hall for indoor, physical activities. There are two garden spaces available to the front and rear of the kindergarten.

About the inspection

This was an unannounced inspection which took place on 30 April 2026 between 08:45 and 15:45 and on the 01 May 2026 between 09:00 and 12:00. One Inspector carried out the inspection.

To prepare for the inspection we reviewed information about this service. This included, registration information, information submitted by the service and intelligence gathered since registration.

In making our evaluations of the service we:

- spoke with children and two families using the service
- considered feedback from 17 families through an online questionnaire
- considered feedback from three staff through an online questionnaire
- observed practice and daily life
- reviewed documents relating to the care of children and the management of the service.

As part of our inspections, we assess core assurances. Core assurances are checks we make to ensure children are safe, the physical environment is well maintained and that a service is operating legally. At the time of this inspection, improvements were identified relating to core assurances. We have reported where improvement is necessary within leadership heading.

Key messages

- The service had a strong, well-embedded vision and positive environment, with confident, engaged children.
- Policies and procedures for the use of digital devices should be reviewed to strengthen safeguarding and data protection.
- Leaders responded promptly to identified issues, including registration requirements and digital safety, demonstrating a commitment to compliance, safeguarding and continuous improvement.
- Children experienced a high-quality, nurturing environment with strong staff interactions that promoted confidence, independence and deeply engaged, child-led learning.
- While outdoor play provided challenge and exploration, continuing plans to develop access to provision across outdoor spaces would increase opportunities for choice and independence.
- Staff consistently demonstrated warm, nurturing and respectful relationships, ensuring children felt safe, secure and valued.

From this inspection we evaluated this service as:

In evaluating quality, we use a six point scale where 1 is unsatisfactory and 6 is excellent

Leadership	4 - Good
Children play and learn	5 - Very Good
Children are supported to achieve	5 - Very Good

Further details on the particular areas inspected are provided at the end of this report.

Leadership 4 - Good

We evaluated this quality indicator as good, where there were important strengths within the setting's work and some aspects which could benefit from improvement.

Quality indicator: Leadership and management of staff and resources

The service demonstrated a clearly defined and embedded vision, values and aims that effectively informed practice. The mission statement was reflected in children's experiences, with children observed to be confident, highly engaged and leading their own play within a calm, nurturing environment. Vision, values and aims were well communicated through notice boards and the service handbook, ensuring a shared understanding among staff and families.

Self-evaluation processes were in place and supported staff to reflect on the service provided. Staff were developing their understanding of the new shared Quality Improvement Framework for the early learning and childcare sectors and beginning to embed this in practice. Self-evaluation identified strengths and informed next steps. The service identified in their improvement plan a need to develop planned approaches to ongoing self-evaluation and evidence gathering. A reflective culture was evident and further developing self-evaluation to ensure it was consistently planned will continue to strengthen outcomes for children.

Quality assurance and moderation processes were in place through professional dialogue and joint review of children's learning stories. While these approaches were not yet consistently recorded or systematically planned, they provided a strong foundation for reflective practice. During inspection discussions and the subsequent feedback visit, leaders demonstrated a proactive commitment to formalise quality assurance processes by creating a quality assurance calendar. This would support a more structured approach to monitoring key areas of practice to ensure they remained aligned with best practice guidance.

The service had developed an annual improvement plan with clear priorities aligned to the wider school plan. Staff demonstrated a good awareness of these priorities, particularly in relation to enhancing outdoor spaces and promoting child-led experiences. Continuing to develop the improvement planning process by incorporating clear timescales, defined responsibilities and regular evaluation of impact would support a more robust approach.

During inspection, it was identified that the service was providing a late room that included school-aged childcare within the kindergarten provision. This arrangement had developed historically and was previously supported by school staff, but was now delivered solely by kindergarten staff. As a result, it did not align with the service's current registration, which is limited to children not yet attending primary school. The provider was advised that, if they wish to continue offering care to primary school-aged children within their kindergarten, they should apply to amend the service's conditions of registration. This would ensure staffing and care arrangements meet regulatory requirements and best practice. Leaders acknowledged this and made immediate plans to address it to ensure they provided a service in line with their conditions of registration (see area for improvement one).

Environmental risk assessments were in place and contributed effectively to children's safety. Staff demonstrated a clear understanding of their responsibilities, completing daily checks alongside children, including monitoring outdoor areas to ensure they were safe. The use of SIMOA the elephant further supported children's awareness of safety, with staff and children using it to count and check attendance during transitions. As a result, children were supported to develop an understanding of safety routines and remained safe and well supervised throughout the day.

The service had a comprehensive range of policies in place to support practice; however, review dates were not consistently recorded, making it difficult to evidence when policies had been updated. Staff used their own personal mobile devices to record and share children's learning. The use of personal mobile phones to take children's photographs presented potential risks to safeguarding and data protection. While policies stipulated photos must be deleted after 7 days and checks on deletion were undertaken, we discussed these could not sufficiently mitigate risks associated with personal devices. Leaders took immediate action and introduced an alternative device supplied by the service to take photos and document children's learning. Leaders recognised the need to strengthen policies, review processes and implement clearer, more robust procedures regarding digital safety. A new policy was developed to ensure staff no longer used personal devices and this aligned with best practice. As a result children were safer from harm.

Leaders demonstrated effective leadership through robust safer recruitment. Well structured induction processes, supported the development of a skilled and cohesive staff team. One staff commented "Very smooth and supportive induction, no question goes unanswered". Overall, staff felt well supported, positively impacting the quality of care and experiences for children.

Areas for improvement

1. The service should ensure that care arrangements fully align with regulatory requirements and best practice guidance. This should include but not be limited to ensuring they adhere to the services conditions of registration at all times. Where they plan to have school aged childcare within the provision this should be applied for through submitting a variation to their conditions of registration.

This is to ensure that care and support is consistent with the Health and Social Care Standard (HSCS) which states that: 'If I experience care and support in a group, the overall size and composition of that group is right for me' (HSCS 1.8) and 'I experience high quality care and support based on relevant evidence, guidance and best practice' (HSCS 4.11).

Children play and learn 5 - Very Good

We found major strengths in this aspect of the setting's work and identified very few areas for improvement, therefore we evaluated this quality indicator as very good.

Quality indicator: Playing, learning and developing.

Children experienced a high-quality indoor environment that effectively supported engagement and child-led play. Families commented, "children have the opportunity to take part in multiple activities that suit their needs" and "we think the overall service provided by St Mary's is exceptional. They teach our children to be confident in themselves and excellent team mates to their friends and peers". The use of loose parts was a key strength, promoting creativity, curiosity and problem-solving, with children independently constructing and collaborating in imaginative play. Staff demonstrated strong knowledge of children, extending learning in meaningful ways, such as developing mini-beast interests into rich experiences including an ant farm and compost area. As a result, children were happy, confident and deeply engaged in their learning.

A wide range of opportunities including planting and regular outdoor and woodland visits, supported children's enthusiasm, wellbeing and connection to nature. One family commented, "The team do a wonderful job of taking the children to a local wood where they can play and explore. They also have excellent outdoor resources at nursery that the children can utilise". While outdoor play provided challenge and exploration, access to the full outdoor environment was limited, as only one of the two garden spaces was used at a time. This meant access to core provision resources was limited, reducing opportunities for choice and independence. This was recognised in the service improvement plan and the service should continue to consider how to increase consistent access to core outdoor provision to further support children's choice and independence.

Interactions were calm, respectful and unhurried, with a strong focus on listening to children and supporting individual needs. Children were empowered to lead their play through skilled, responsive interactions. Staff used effective questioning, commentary and wondering aloud to extend thinking and support sustained shared thinking. They engaged at children's level to promote meaningful conversations, encouraging peer interaction to build confidence and independence. As a result, children's learning, confidence and social development were enhanced.

Children's learning was effectively captured through paper-based learning stories. One family commented, "I love reviewing their activity book. It must be a lot of work to keep updated. Much appreciated". Staff showed a clear understanding of linking observations to next steps, with a consistent "golden thread" supporting meaningful follow-up experiences and progression. They used their strong knowledge of children to target development, for example through offering opportunities to develop balance skills and fine motor activities. Tracking systems were in place to monitor progress, though some duplication increased workload and reduced efficiency. Overall, assessment approaches supported positive outcomes for children.

Planning approaches captured a range of children's experiences, with floor books showing engaging opportunities linked to curriculum outcomes. However, entries were not consistently dated, limiting the ability to track progression, frequency and impact over time. Planning formats, including a curriculum overview and termly plans, were in place, although links to children's interests and responsive practice were not always clearly documented despite being evident in practice. Planning was often influenced by seasonal events and cultural festivals. The new staff team were developing confidence and consistency in their planning approaches. Proposed developments, such as visual planning boards, are positive and would support clearer documentation and communication with families, some of whom requested more feedback on daily experiences. Overall, children benefited from meaningful learning, with scope to strengthen planning to better support continuity, progression and outcomes.

Children are supported to achieve — 5 - Very Good

We found major strengths in this aspect of the setting's work and identified very few areas for improvement; therefore we evaluated this quality indicator as very good.

Quality indicator: Nurturing care and support

Staff consistently demonstrated warm, nurturing and respectful relationships, ensuring children felt safe, secure and valued. They responded sensitively to children's cues and individual preferences, showing strong knowledge of their needs and effectively promoting wellbeing and development. Families commented, "I've never trusted anywhere so much with my child. They're in great hands", "Staff are very warm and friendly" and "They seem to genuinely care and treat each child as an individual". As a result, children experienced a strong sense of wellbeing and security.

There were appropriate opportunities for rest and sleep, with younger children using sleep mats and older children accessing a quiet, cosy area. Staff demonstrated awareness of safe sleep guidance, adapting practices as required and carried out regular recorded checks, supporting children's safety and wellbeing. While arrangements were generally suitable, the use of mats without sheets may affect comfort and introducing coverings would further enhance children's comfort and overall wellbeing during rest periods.

All staff had completed child protection training and demonstrated a clear understanding of their safeguarding responsibilities. They were confident in recognising and responding to concerns, understood reporting procedures and were familiar with relevant policies and external agencies. This supported a safeguarding culture within the service and contributed to children's safety and wellbeing.

Arrangements were in place for the safe management of medication, including consent forms and secure storage. Staff demonstrated awareness of children's medical needs. Some areas of practice could be strengthened to fully align with best practice guidance. For example, whilst staff informed families verbally, records did not consistently evidence that medication administered during the session had been communicated to and acknowledged by families. Regular reviews of medication information were not yet established in line with best practice guidance. As a result, recording and review processes required strengthening to enhance children's safety and wellbeing. Leaders took immediate steps to improve documentation and reviews.

Snack and mealtimes were positive and supported children's wellbeing and development. One family commented, "Amazing food - including salad and fresh fruit. Chef is longstanding and school posts the menu weekly for parents to look at". Snack times were a particular strength, promoting independence and life skills as children prepared, served and cleared their own food, with staff supporting safety and encouraging conversation. Lunchtimes provided nutritious meals and opportunities for social interaction, though independence could be further enhanced by extending self-serving approaches. The dining hall offered valuable social experiences with older children, although at times noise levels restricted conversation and a calmer environment would support engagement. Staff demonstrated strong awareness of allergen management and worked well with catering staff, with scope to further personalise support through ongoing communication with families. Overall, mealtimes supported children's health, independence and social development, with clear strengths and potential for further enhancement.

Children's personal care needs were supported effectively within a clean, well-organised environment. Care routines, including nappy changing, were carried out respectfully and sensitively, resulting in positive, relaxed experiences. Effective handwashing practices supported children's understanding of hygiene, while resources such as tissues and mirrors promoted independence in self-care. Staff followed appropriate infection prevention procedures, contributing to a safe and hygienic environment. As a result, personal care practices upheld children's dignity, supported independence and positively contributed to their health and wellbeing.

All families agreed they were involved in reviewing their child's personal plan, which was developed in partnership and reflected individual needs, interests and preferences. Staff demonstrated strong, trusting relationships with families and a clear understanding of children's needs, supported by effective informal communication. Chronologies were in place to record significant events, providing a helpful overview of children's experiences. There was scope to further enhance these by consistently recording agreed strategies of support and reviewing impact to strengthen tracking of wellbeing. While personal plans were reviewed, increasing the consistency and frequency of reviews as identified in their improvement plan and in line with legislation would further ensure information remained current and responsive. Overall positive partnership working supported children's care and wellbeing, with opportunities to strengthen recording of support and reviews of personal plans.

The service developed positive, inclusive relationships with families and actively encouraged engagement. Opportunities such as stay and play sessions linked to seasonal events supported family involvement and strengthened connections with the setting. One family commented, "Warm and welcoming. Always kept in the loop re what is going on. Happy to chat through any questions re my child. Quick to respond". Daily communication primarily took place through informal conversations at drop-off and collection and learning journals were shared termly, which families valued. However, feedback indicated that some families would benefit from more detailed information about their child's daily experiences, as children were not always able to recall this themselves. Enhancing communication approaches to provide clearer, more regular insights into children's daily play and learning would improve partnership working.

Complaints

There have been no complaints upheld since the last inspection. Details of any older upheld complaints are published at www.careinspectorate.com.

Detailed evaluations

Leadership	4 - Good
Leadership and management of staff and resources	4 - Good

Children play and learn	5 - Very Good
Playing, learning and developing	5 - Very Good

Children are supported to achieve	5 - Very Good
Nurturing care and support	5 - Very Good

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