Cauldeen Primary School Acorn Nursery
Day Care of Children

Cauldeen Primary School
MacKay Road
Inverness
IV2 4HZ

Telephone: 01463 235 905

Type of inspection:
Unannounced

Completed on:
10 June 2026

Service provided by:
Highland Council

Service provider number:
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Service no:
CS2003017187

About the service

Cauldeen Primary School Acorn Nursery is registered to provide a care service to a maximum of 70 children, from the age of three years to primary 7 of whom no more than 25 children are of primary age. The service is operated by Highland Council.

The nursery is located within two main rooms in the school, with access to a spacious outdoor play area. This outdoor space offers a variety of loose parts and open-ended resources, which support and enrich children's imaginative play and learning experiences.

School-aged children attending the before- and after-school provision use a separate room within the school, as well as the main school playground.

About the inspection

This was an unannounced inspection which took place on Monday 8 and Tuesday 9 June 2026, with feedback on Wednesday 10 June 2026. The inspection was carried out by two inspectors from the Care Inspectorate.

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

In making our evaluations of the service we:

- Spent time with children using the service.
- Received completed questionnaires from parents and staff.
- Spoke with staff and management.
- Assessed core assurances, including the physical environment.
- Observed practice and children's experiences.
- Reviewed documents.

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, no improvements were identified relating to core assurances.

Key messages

- Overall, children were nurtured and supported throughout their experiences.
- Some areas of the playrooms lacked sufficient resources, limiting opportunities for stimulating play.
- Staff deployment remains an area for improvement, particularly during key routines and transitions, which affected both safety and the quality of experiences.
- Work had began to improve the quality of the information on observations/planning and next steps.
- Quality assurance and self-evaluation processes were not yet effective and were at an early stage of development. This limited the service's ability to drive improvement

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	2 - Weak
Children play and learn	3 - Satisfactory / Adequate
Children are supported to achieve	3 - Satisfactory / Adequate

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

Leadership 2 - Weak

We made an evaluation of weak for this heading, as there were some strengths, but these were compromised by important weaknesses

Quality indicator: Leadership and management of resources

Leadership arrangements were not sufficiently robust to sustain high-quality experiences for children. Competing demands and limited leadership capacity significantly constrained the effective allocation of resources, resulting in an inability to fully meet key leadership responsibilities. Delays in appointing to key leadership roles further reduced capacity and continuity. This negatively impacted the service's ability to drive and sustain improvement. As a result, the service lacked the strong, consistent leadership required to ensure positive and sustained outcomes for children.

The nursery's vision, values and aims were outdated and did not reflect the current needs of children and families. This weakness limited a shared sense of purpose. The manager recognised the need for review and agreed to address this with greater involvement from children, families and staff.

Ineffective quality assurance processes meant that children were not receiving high-quality care, support, and learning experiences. While action plans were in place and regularly reviewed, they had not yet led to sufficient improvements in practice. Targets were not currently fully embedded, making it difficult to measure progress. As a result, children did not consistently experience high quality care, support and learning. The manager agreed on actions to move forward and was working with both the local authority and senior management.

Self-evaluation processes were not firmly embedded in practice. Opportunities for all staff to come all together to reflect meaningfully on their practice were limited. This lack of structured, regular reflection limited staff's ability to evaluate the impact of their practice on children's experiences and outcomes. It also reduced the shared understanding of improvement priorities across the team. The leadership team should take proactive steps to strengthen self-evaluation processes by creating regular, purposeful opportunities for all staff to engage in professional dialogue, reflect on practice, and contribute to clearly identified improvement priorities. The management team have plans in place to address this **(see requirement 1**).

Overall, the pace of change within the service was too slow to achieve sustained improvement. Although actions have begun with the local authority and leadership roles have been established, it is still too early to determine whether these changes are having a meaningful or positive impact. The provider must take action to strengthen leadership capacity, improve oversight and ensure that planned actions are implemented promptly and effectively. Without this, the service will not achieve the pace of improvement required to deliver consistently high quality care and learning experiences for children.

Quality Indicator: Staff skills, knowledge, values and deployment

Children's care and support benefitted from the positive relationships they had developed with staff, who often got down to interact at children's levels. The team worked well together, throughout nursery and school-aged child care, and most of the team had worked together for a number of years. Staff interactions with children across the service were generally warm and caring. Children had formed positive attachments with staff at breakfast and out of school care which contributed to fostering a relaxed, calm ethos at these

key times of the day.

Support and supervision for staff was ineffective, as the manager did not provide sufficient structured guidance to help staff improve the quality of their interactions with children. We discussed with the manager how greater use could be made of support and supervision meetings to identify learning needs and to plan for how these could be met within a reasonable time frame. The lack of regular, structured team meetings also limited opportunities for staff to reflect on and improve their practice. This contributed to inconsistent practice, resulting in variability in the quality of care, play and learning experiences children received. The manger agreed to address this.

Staff deployment throughout the day was inconsistent and had an impact on the quality of children's experiences. Although some appropriate systems were in places such as staff communicating when leaving areas and using walkie-talkies to support communication, these were not applied consistently or effectively. As a result, children were not always effectively supported and supervised. During key points in the day, including snack time, outdoor play and the start of sessions, staff deployment was not managed effectively. This led to missed opportunities to provide consistent, high-quality interactions and support for children's learning. When additional support was required for children with higher levels of need, staff deployment lacked flexibility. This resulted in gaps in supervision and reduced the quality, continuity, and responsiveness of staff interactions. As a result, children's play and learning were not consistently well supported.

Overall, significant improvement is required to ensure staff deployment is well planned, responsive, and consistently promotes children's safety, wellbeing, and high-quality learning experiences. This was identified as a requirement at the two previous inspections and has not been met, it will therefore be continued. **(See Requirement 1 under 'What the service has done to meet any requirements made at or since the last inspection?'**).

Requirements

1. By 23 November 2026, the provider must ensure improved outcomes for children by implementing effective and robust quality assurance processes. To do this the provider must, at a minimum, ensure:

a) The manager is supported to be able to undertake effective quality assurance.
b) Staff are supported to develop their knowledge and understanding around self-evaluation processes and are involved in the systematic evaluation of their work and the work of the service.
c) Clear and effective plans are in place for maintaining and improving the service.
d) Regular and effective support and supervision for all staff is implemented.
e) The manager effectively monitors the work of each member of staff and the service as a whole.
f) Clear systems are in place for children and their families to provide feedback and to be actively involved in the evaluation of the service provided.

This is to comply with Regulation 3 Principles and Regulation 4(1)(a) Welfare of service users of The Social Care and Social Work Improvement Scotland (Requirements for Care Services) Regulations 2011 (SSI 2011/210).

This is to ensure that care and support is consistent with the Health and Social Care Standards (HSCS) which state that:

'I benefit from a culture of continuous improvement, with the organisation having robust and transparent quality assurance processes' (HSCS 4.19).

Children play and learn 3 - Satisfactory / Adequate

We evaluated this quality indicator as satisfactory/adequate where strengths just outweighed the weaknesses.

Quality Indicator: Playing, learning and developing

Overall, most children were engaged and motivated in their play and were having fun with other children. Children experienced opportunities to lead their own play and learning through choice and free-flow access to the indoor and outdoor environment. We observed children engage in imaginative play in the construction area as well as water play and participating in energetic play outdoors. This stimulated their natural curiosity, learning and creativity. However, this positive experience was not consistent for all children. At times, some children were observed to be disengaged, highlighting gaps in staff responsiveness. These children would have benefited from more purposeful adult interaction to support their inclusion and re-engagement in meaningful play. This suggests that opportunities to ensure all children are fully supported and actively involved in their learning were not consistently maximised.

Children benefited from access to open-ended, natural and real-life resources, including water, mud, sand and playdough which supported curiosity, creativity and problem solving. Outdoor experiences provided appropriate opportunities for risk-benefit play and helped children to develop confidence, coordination and independence. Staff interactions were caring and responsive and helped children to feel secure and valued. However, there were missed opportunities at times to extend children's learning through questioning and meaningful engagement in play. Staffing pressures reduced the consistency of high-quality interactions across the setting. The provider must continue to monitor the impact of staff absences and changes within the nursery to ensure positive outcomes for children attending **(see requirement 1 under quality indicator Staff skills, knowledge, values and deployment)**.

Children did not consistently benefit from a clear, well-planned approach to developing their language, literacy and communication skills. While there were some positive experiences, such as engaging activities including playdough and storytelling, these were not embedded consistently across the day or for all children. As a result, practice lacked coherence and progression, limiting its overall impact and reducing how effectively children's individual learning and development needs were supported.

A planning system to develop children's interests, play and to build on prior learning was in the early stages of being developed. Effective observations of children's learning and development was were also an identified area for improvement. Work was ongoing with staff to develop consistent approaches to both planning and recording observations effectively. We saw that some observations were linked to the floor books, however, some recorded observations of learning did not always show progression or any next steps. This meant the approach did not effectively support children to reach their full potential. Until this is achieved, the previous area for improvement remains in place. **(See section, What the service has done to meet any areas for improvement we made at or since the last inspection)**.

Children are supported to achieve — 3 - Satisfactory / Adequate

We evaluated this quality indicator as satisfactory/adequate where strengths just outweighed the weaknesses.

Quality Indicator: Nurturing care and support

Staff were nurturing, caring, and worked very well together as a team across breakfast, nursery, and school aged childcare. Children were happy, relaxed and settled within the service. This helped them to form strong attachments with the staff looking after them. Older children in breakfast club and school aged childcare confidently approached members of staff for support and to help them fulfil their needs. Children responded by being very settled and confident in their surroundings and in the care of staff. When children needed reassurance, staff responded warmly and offered cuddles, if this is what they wanted. This supported children to feel safe and secure during their time at the service.

Personal plans were in place, and most staff spoke knowledgably and confidently about children's individual care needs and what they did to support them. However, children's wellbeing was not always supported by the consistent use of strategies identified in personal plans. This meant that some children did not consistently receive targeted support from all staff, to effectively benefit their individual needs and to enable them to reach their potential. As a result, there were missed opportunities to support positive outcomes for children.

Children experienced unhurried snack and mealtimes, which were relaxed and calm. Children attending breakfast and school-aged childcare were able to choose from a variety of healthy choices. Children in nursery were offered opportunities to be involved in snack preparation and could select and serve healthy snack items for themselves. Three to five year old children experienced smooth transitions at lunch times. They could serve some food items at the table for themselves. There was sufficient staff to support and supervise children as they ate. However, some staff became task focused during snack, meaning that some children were not well supported or supervised. When highlighted, the leadership team were responsive in ensuring that all children were well supervised. The service should continue to develop monitoring children's experiences to highlight and address where such gaps are identified.

The service demonstrated effective communication practices through emails, newsletters and daily conversations, which supported strong connections with families. Parents were welcomed into the setting during drop-off, and staff engaged positively in conversations, fostering trust and partnership. This created opportunities for informal information sharing about children's needs, and families spoke positively about the staff team. Comments included:

'Staff are very knowledgeable, friendly, helpful, and communicate all information very effectively'

'All the staff are extremely friendly. They genuinely care about all the children and that is clear to see'.

'The staff go above and beyond for the children in their care'.

'I like how welcoming the nursery teachers are, and how comfortable they make children and parents feel when we enter the building'.

Transitions were planned effectively. Staff demonstrated a clear understanding of the importance of supporting children and families through key transition points, including settling into the nursery and preparing for the move to school. They used communication and stay and play sessions to promote continuity of care and learning, contributing to a smooth and supportive experience for children and families.

We found robust systems in place to support children's health and wellbeing in relation to the management and administration of medicines. Recorded information corresponded, which meant that children received the correct medication and the right care for identified medical needs.

Staff had a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities in keeping children safe and protected from harm. They were confident in explaining how they would respond to any child protection concerns. This helped ensure that children remained safe.

What the service has done to meet any requirements we made at or since the last inspection

Requirements

Requirement 1

By 9 June 2023, the provider must ensure children are safe and receive high quality experiences at all times. To do this the provider must, at a minimum: ensure that at all times suitably qualified and competent staff are working in the nursery in such numbers as are appropriate for the health, welfare and safety of children.

This is to comply with regulation 15 (a) of the Social Care and Social Work Improvement Scotland (Requirements for Care Services) regulations 2011 (SSI 2011/210)(Requirements for Care Services)

This is in order to ensure that care and support is consistent with Health and Social Care Standards which state that: 'My needs are met by the right number of people.' (HSCS 3.15)

This requirement was made on 15 February 2003.

Action taken on previous requirement

Staff deployment throughout the day was inconsistent and had an impact on the quality of children's experiences. During key points in the day, including snack time, outdoor play and the start of sessions, staff deployment was not managed effectively. This led to missed opportunities to provide consistent, high-quality interactions and support for children's learning.

When additional support was required for children with higher levels of need, staff deployment lacked flexibility. This resulted in gaps in supervision and reduced the quality, continuity, and responsiveness of staff interactions. As a result, children's experiences were not always as rich or individualised as intended, highlighting a need to review the deployment of staff.

This requirement has not been met. The timescale has been extended to 2 November 2026.

Not met

What the service has done to meet any areas for improvement we made at or since the last inspection

Areas for improvement

Previous area for improvement 1

To support children to achieve, the service should improve the approach and skills of staff in relation to planning for children's learning and tracking and monitoring their progress. Staff should be supported to develop their understanding of how to effectively observe and assess children's learning in order to plan quality learning experiences and meaningful next steps.

This is to ensure care and support is consistent with the Health and Social Care Standards, which state: 'I am supported to achieve my potential in education and employment if this is right for me.' (HSCS 1.27).

This area for improvement was made on 15 February 2023.

Action taken since then

Staff have recently completed floor book training and work was ongoing with staff to develop consistent approaches to both planning and recording observations effectively. We saw that some observations were linked to the floor books, however, some recorded observations of learning did not always show progression or any next steps. This meant the approach did not effectively support children to reach their full potential.

This area for improvement has not been fully met and remains in place.

Complaints

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

Detailed evaluations

Leadership	2 - Weak
Leadership and management of staff and resources	2 - Weak
Staff skills, knowledge, values and deployment	2 - Weak

Children play and learn	3 - Satisfactory / Adequate
Playing, learning and developing	3 - Satisfactory / Adequate

Children are supported to achieve	3 - Satisfactory / Adequate
Nurturing care and support	3 - Satisfactory / Adequate

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