Miller Academy Early Learning and Childcare Centre
Day Care of Children

Miller Academy
Princes Street
Thurso
KW14 7DH

Type of inspection:
Unannounced

Completed on:
27 September 2022

Service provided by:
Highland Council

Service provider number:
SP2003001693

Service no:
CS2003017246

About the service

Miller Academy Early Learning and Childcare Centre is situated within a purpose built accommodation located within the grounds of Miller Academy primary school in Thurso. The centre comprises of three large and bright playrooms, each with direct access to the fully enclosed outdoor area, toilets, foyer and staff office.

The service is registered to provide a care service to a maximum of 80 children aged two to those attending primary school. Of those no more than 20 are aged between two to three years old. The service is managed by the head teacher of the primary school and is provided by the local authority, Highland Council.

About the inspection

This was an unannounced inspection which took place on 27 September 2022 between 08:30 and 17:30. 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, registration information, information submitted by the service and intelligence gathered since the last inspection.

In making our evaluations of the service we:

- Spoke with eight people using the service and 18 of their families
- Spoke with 15 staff and management
- Observed practice and daily life
- Reviewed documents.

Key messages

• Children experienced warm, caring and nurturing interactions from staff. They placed a strong focus on supporting children's health and wellbeing using nurturing, holistic approaches.

• Personal plans were in place for all children, contributing to consistency of care.

• Children directed their own play and were mostly engaged in purposeful, fun experiences, through a mix of planned and spontaneous learning.

• Staff had recently reviewed the outdoor environment and resources provided, to make sure that children had opportunities to use creativity and curiosity through their play and learning experiences.

• The service benefitted from strong and dedicated leadership who demonstrated a good understanding of creating a culture of continuous improvement.

• The manager had recently focused on staff deployment as an area for self-evaluation and improvement. High importance had been placed on ensuring children received high quality care by staff that met individual children's needs.

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

How good is our care, play and learning?	4 - Good
How good is our setting?	4 - Good
How good is our leadership?	5 - Very Good
How good is our staff team?	5 - Very Good

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

How good is our care, play and learning? 4 - Good

From the evidence gathered, we evaluated key question 1 as good, a number of important strengths which clearly outweigh areas for improvement.

QI- 1.1: Nurturing Care and Support

Children experienced warm, caring and nurturing interactions from staff. They placed a strong focus on supporting children's health and wellbeing using nurturing, holistic approaches. Children who needed extra reassurance were given cuddles and shown kindness by the responsive staff who clearly demonstrated they knew children well. Parents had been supported to be part of this process, including them in the transition to support their children from home into nursery. This contributed to children developing confidence, resilience and feeling secure.

Mealtimes were a relaxed, homely and positive experience for children. Staff involved children within the preparation of snack, encouraging children to be a fully involved helper. They were able to choose when they came for snack limiting interruption to play and supporting children's choice. Snack provided children with lots of opportunities for promoting independence and social skills. Lunch was served in the school canteen. Staff were responsive to children's needs, supporting individual children to develop language and communication. They sat with the children, sharing lunch and providing good role modelling. This ensured a relaxed, positive and social experience for children.

Personal plans were in place for all children, contributing to consistency of care. Staff knew the children well and could confidently talk about individual likes, dislikes, personalities and support needs. These were reviewed regularly with parents to ensure they capture effective information to support and meet children's needs. As a result, children's wellbeing and developmental needs were met effectively and compassionately.

Children's medical and allergy needs were supported well in a safe and sensitive manner. Storage of required medication and relevant paperwork were organised and safe, with staff regularly reviewing with parents. One child recognised their medication and spoke about how staff support them to access this when needed. This contributed to children feeling supported and having confidence in the care provided.

The service had taken positive action to help support the potential effects of the recent Covid-19 pandemic on children's overall health and wellbeing. They had spoken with outside professionals, including educational psychology to see how best to support new children transitioning into nursery who have had limited opportunities for socialisation due to past restrictions. Following consultation with parents, they had dedicated one playroom to new younger children to provide additional support to those who needed it. The manager and staff spoke positively about this strategy and how it had been implemented and received by children and families. This supported a strong focus on applying professional knowledge and skills to support children to reach their full potential.

QI- 1.3: Play and Learning

Children directed their own play and were mostly engaged in purposeful, fun experiences, through a mix of planned and spontaneous learning. Staff used skilled open-ended questioning to extend children's curiosity, problem solving skills and promote development of imagination. We spoke with the manager about creating a balance between children leading their play and where staff interaction may be needed to support and

extend learning. Some groups of children had their play interrupted for longer periods of time than others to take part in adult led activities including circle time, tidy up and story time. This had the potential to impact on the quality of experiences for children.

Planning floor books were in place to capture children's thoughts, interests and to plan play and learning experiences. Children's voices had been recorded to help inform planning processes through quotes, drawings and questions. Next steps were identified by staff along with possible areas of interest for children to develop. We discussed with the manager making sure individual children's learning is consistently captured within this planning process, to support staff to use responsive planning approaches, and to enable children to actively learn and lead their play.

Observations of learning were recorded by staff within children's individual learning folders and online through a Dojo platform system. We discussed with the manager ensuring these systems enable children to have ownership over their learning and that progression is consistently tracked effectively, supporting depth of learning. Children's learning and observations were shared with parents using the Dojo system, to enable them to comment and feel included in their child's learning. Feedback from parents was very positive, stating they felt informed and involved by the service. This supported parents to have confidence and feel included in their child's development.

Children were given daily access to outdoor play with opportunities for risky play and development of gross and fine motor skills. They were able to use both the enclosed top nursery outdoor area and the large, wooded garden area below. The service had worked in partnership with parents and children to develop this area to provide lots of opportunities for creativity, problem solving and imaginative play. Children were co-operating and using their imaginations with staff encouraging and extending play and learning experiences, building on children's existing knowledge. Opportunities for developing literacy and numeracy skills were supported through painting leaves, drawing, and sharing stories. This supported children to develop skills for lifelong learning.

How good is our setting? 4 - Good

From the evidence gathered, we evaluated key question 2 as good, a number of important strengths which clearly outweigh areas for improvement

QI- 2.2: Children Experience High Quality Facilities

Staff had recently reviewed the outdoor environment and resources provided, to make sure that children had opportunities to use creativity and curiosity through their play and learning experiences. This resulted in an exciting play space which encouraged children to explore and use their imagination, building on existing skills and experience. Feedback had been given by parents and children as to what they would like to see within the outdoor area. The service had planned to hold an open day to share with families how their views had been used to inform improvements within the service. This supported a shared, collaborative vision for the service involving all stakeholders.

There were some opportunities for children to be creative and use problem solving skills indoors. Some children had opportunities to use natural and loose parts play resources and engage in some sensory play experiences. However this was not consistent across the three playrooms. We spoke with the manager about enhancing the resources available within the indoor environment to promote equal experiences between indoors and outdoors for children to widen and develop skills for life. Also to ensure that developmentally appropriate resources and equipment were consistently available for older children

accessing the breakfast club. We signposted the service to the Loose Parts toolkit and the Space to Grow practice documents available on the Care Inspectorate Hub for guidance (see area for improvement 1).

There were opportunities within the three playrooms for children to rest and relax. Furnishings including sofas, cushions and blankets had been added to the rooms to create areas which had a homely and comfortable feel. This supported children to feel valued and that they matter.

Staff placed a strong focus on keeping children safe. They had a good knowledge and understanding of our SIMOA campaign, available on the Care Inspectorate hub, and how this supported them to ensure children were accounted for at all times. Staff communicated well with each other regarding numbers of children and which area they had chosen to play in. Head counts were carried out regularly to support staff to keep children safe. Outside doors had been alarmed to ensure children were not able to leave the premises unattended. This created a safe and secure environment where children could enjoy a variety of play experiences supported by effective staff practice.

How good is our leadership? 5 - Very Good

From the evidence gathered, we evaluated key question 3 as very good, performance that clearly demonstrates major strengths in supporting positive outcomes for children.

QI- 3.1: Quality Assurance and Improvement are Led Well

The management team placed a high importance in creating a shared vision for the service involving children, staff and families. They had created a floorbook to capture the thoughts, views and opinions of all stakeholders to be used to review and update the vision, values and aims of the service. Action plans had been developed using these feedback sessions ensuring children and families played a key role in moving forward together. This informed and supported areas within the improvement plan for the service with a strong focus on providing high quality experiences and outcomes for children and families.

The service benefitted from strong and dedicated leadership team who demonstrated a good understanding of creating a culture of continuous improvement. Staff were supported effectively to take part in meaningful self-evaluation, using the quality framework for daycare of children, childminding and school aged childcare, available from the Care Inspectorate hub. The most recent focus had been on ensuring high quality staff engagement and deployment which we will later discuss within quality indicator 4.3 - How good is our staffing. The leadership and management team had worked in partnership with staff to ensure children were experiencing high quality care and supervision from responsive and caring staff, reflecting on current practice. This effective approach enabled the service to provide high quality care and support.

Quality assurance processes were organised, robust and focused on improving outcomes for children. Regular monitoring of practice and processes had been carried out with feedback given to staff to inform improvement and to recognise strengths in practice. Areas for improvement within this inspection process had already been identified within the monitoring process and action points agreed and implemented. The positive impact on children's experiences and outcomes was clearly evident, including how families had been supported to overcome the negative effects of the recent pandemic. Feedback from parents was very positive, stating they appreciated the opportunities to be involved and to influence positive change within the service. This supported them to be meaningfully involved and have confidence in the quality of care provided.

How good is our staff team? 5 - Very Good

From the evidence gathered, we evaluated key question 4 as very good, performance that clearly demonstrates major strengths in supporting positive outcomes for children.

QI- 4.3: Staff Deployment

The manager had recently focused on staff deployment as an area for self-evaluation and improvement. High importance had been placed on ensuring children received high quality care by staff that met individual children's needs. Continuity of care for children was consistent throughout the day with minimal changes to staffing, this was supported by careful and considered planning of staff breaks and rotas. Staffing levels were observed to be very good with sufficient numbers of staff to meet children's needs. They were flexible and moved around the service, with the children, to ensure highly effective supervision. In addition, children who needed more adult support at times to help them achieve their full potential, received this for as long as it was needed. The flexibility of staff ensured that children's experiences were skilfully and consistently supported, including by newer additions to the staff team.

The staff team communicated well with each other when a task took them away from their designated area. They informed each other when leaving the room for something or attending to a child's needs. They moved flexibly with the children, responding to where they would be most effectively deployed. The ethos between team members was positive and interactions between staff were kind and respectful. This helped to create a positive atmosphere for both staff and children to feel comfortable and secure in.

Children's mealtimes were well planned and ensured children were supported effectively during these busier times of the day. Staff were focused on helping children and meeting individual needs. The pace of mealtimes was relaxed and staff were aware of where they would be placed best during these times to help children who needed reassurance or encouragement. This ensured staff worked as a team to meet children's needs.

Staff worked well together to ensure children were always accounted for. Staff were observed to be carrying out checks to monitor the number of children in the setting. They made effective use of the range of skills, knowledge and experience within the team to ensure the wellbeing of children in the service. Routines, transitions and the use of the environment were planned well to support quality experiences, whilst meeting individual children's needs. A detailed register was kept by staff to ensure they knew children were safe when accessing outdoor activities and a number system was used to reflect the number of children within each room that day. Risk assessments had been carried out to ensure staff were confident in ensuring a safe environment for both themselves and the children. This supported children to enjoy challenging and fun play experiences whilst staying secure.

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

How good is our care, play and learning?	4 - Good
1.1 Nurturing care and support	5 - Very Good
1.3 Play and learning	4 - Good

How good is our setting?	4 - Good
2.2 Children experience high quality facilities	4 - Good

How good is our leadership?	5 - Very Good
3.1 Quality assurance and improvement are led well	5 - Very Good

How good is our staff team?	5 - Very Good
4.3 Staff deployment	5 - Very Good

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Care Inspectorate
Compass House
11 Riverside Drive
Dundee
DD1 4NY

enquiries@careinspectorate.com

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