

Cunningsburgh Early Years Day Care of Children

Cunningsburgh School
Cunningsburgh
Shetland
ZE2 9HB

Telephone: 01595 807 250

Type of inspection:
Unannounced

Completed on:
18 September 2026

Service provided by:
Shetland Islands Council

Service provider number:
SP2003002063

Service no:
CS2004070872

About the service

Cunningsburgh Early Years is registered to provide care to a maximum of 24 children aged from three years to those not yet attending primary school. The service operates from a purpose-built extension to the primary school premises in Cunningsburgh, an area on mainland Shetland.

During the operating times, the service has dedicated use of the open-plan playroom with kitchen area, toilets, office and fully enclosed outdoor area. Children also have use of the school gym, library, grounds and community play park nearby.

There were up to 17 children present during the inspection visit.

About the inspection

This was an unannounced inspection which took place on 17 and 18 September 2026. This 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 and complaints information, information submitted by the service and intelligence gathered throughout the inspection year.

To inform our evaluation we:

- spent time with children using the service and spoke to nine of their parents/carers
- received eight completed questionnaires from staff
- received seven completed questionnaires from parents/carers
- spoke with staff and the management team
- 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

- Children experienced highly nurturing, responsive relationships with staff, helping them feel safe, secure, valued and confident in their daily experiences.
- Strong partnerships with families and professionals ensured children's individual wellbeing needs were identified early and consistently supported.
- Children experienced highly responsive, innovative learning opportunities that inspired curiosity, creativity and sustained engagement across all areas of development.
- Highly skilled staff used effective interactions, assessment and community partnerships to achieve outstanding outcomes for children and families.
- Strong, values-led leadership created a highly inclusive culture where children's rights, wellbeing and positive outcomes were at the heart of practice.
- Children thrived in a rich outdoor environment where they confidently led their learning, demonstrated resilience and managed risk exceptionally well.

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	5 - Very Good
Children play and learn	6 - Excellent
Children are supported to achieve	5 - Very Good

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

Leadership 5 - Very Good

Quality Indicator: Leadership and management of staff and resources

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.

Leaders and staff were committed to a clear and ambitious vision for children which was well understood across the nursery community. The school's SHINE Charter, promoting children as Successful, Happy, Independent, Nurtured and Engaged, was embedded in the life of the service and supported a strong sense of belonging and inclusion. Children, families and staff demonstrated a shared understanding of these values, contributing to a positive and nurturing culture.

Children's rights and the values of the charter were evident in daily practice, policies and procedures. Staff consistently supported children to express their views, discuss their emotions and reflect on their experiences. As a result, children developed confidence, resilience and a strong sense of being respected, listened to and valued.

Self-evaluation was a key strength of the service and was firmly focused on improving outcomes for children. Leaders created meaningful opportunities for children, families and staff to influence the development of the nursery. Parents reported that their views were welcomed and acted upon, demonstrating that engagement was authentic and valued. Feedback gathered from stakeholders was used effectively to inform improvement priorities and evaluate the impact of change.

A wide range of quality assurance activities, including monitoring, audits and stakeholder feedback, supported leaders to identify strengths and areas for development. Leadership approaches were collaborative and inclusive, encouraging staff at all levels to contribute to self-evaluation and improvement discussions. This promoted shared ownership of change and strengthened the team's capacity for continuous improvement.

Children's wellbeing, learning and play experiences were central to improvement planning. Leaders had established a culture of reflection and continuous improvement where changes were carefully considered and implemented at an appropriate pace. This helped ensure improvements were sustainable and resulted in positive outcomes for children. Effective practice was recognised, celebrated and shared within the service and beyond, supporting ongoing professional learning.

Children benefitted from the care and support of an experienced, stable and skilled staff team. Strong relationships between staff, children and families contributed to a consistent and nurturing environment. Staff skills, knowledge and experience were used effectively to meet the needs of children and support positive outcomes.

Staff spoke positively about the support they received from leaders and described a strong family ethos within the service. This fostered a positive and supportive working environment, which enhanced staff wellbeing and contributed to a calm, welcoming atmosphere for children and families. Effective induction and mentoring arrangements ensured new staff were well supported and able to contribute confidently to the high-quality experiences provided.

Children play and learn 6 - Excellent**Quality Indicator: Playing, learning and developing**

We evaluated this quality indicator as excellent where aspects of performance were outstanding and sector leading.

Staff demonstrated a robust understanding of children's learning and development. This knowledge was used highly effectively to create rich, meaningful and challenging experiences tailored to children's interests, strengths and stages of development. As a result, children were highly engaged, motivated learners who demonstrated confidence, curiosity and enthusiasm in their play and learning.

The learning environment was highly stimulating and provided extensive opportunities for children to lead their own learning, use their imagination and investigate their interests. Literacy, language and numeracy were seamlessly embedded throughout the nursery experience. Staff skilfully extended learning through high-quality interactions, encouraging children to participate actively in storytelling, problem-solving and mathematical thinking. Children explored concepts such as number, comparison, position and time naturally through play, supporting the development and application of a broad range of skills.

Children experienced highly effective opportunities to develop digital skills through a range of meaningful and engaging learning experiences. Technology was innovatively integrated into play and learning, enhancing children's curiosity, creativity and understanding of the world around them. For example, QR codes supported access to information about topics of interest. Children planned snacks, ordered food online, and used Google Street View to support real-life learning experiences before local outings. Children developed their understanding of the wider world through an interactive augmented reality globe, while programmable toys supported problem-solving and the development of positional language. Creativity, design skills and understanding of technology were developed through constructing electrical circuits and confidently using real tools, such as a cardboard cutter, to bring their ideas to life. Children were encouraged to express their ideas creatively through digital applications and were involved in creating a transition video to welcome new children to the nursery. This helped develop their confidence, communication skills and sense of belonging.

Children's health and wellbeing was very well supported through free-flow access to a stimulating outdoor environment, which was an integral part of their daily experiences. Children demonstrated high levels of confidence, resilience and independence as they moved freely between indoor and outdoor spaces, leading their own play and learning. They engaged deeply in a wide range of imaginative, sensory and physically challenging experiences that responded well to their interests and stages of development.

The thoughtfully designed outdoor environment offered a rich variety of surfaces, resources and learning experiences, enabling children to make meaningful choices and sustain their interests. Opportunities for loose parts play, planting and growing, and muddy play fostered creativity, curiosity and a strong connection with the natural world. Children sustained their play for extended periods, demonstrating high levels of concentration. As a result, children were highly engaged, motivated learners who demonstrated increasing confidence, independence and ownership of their learning.

Partnerships with families made a significant contribution to children's learning. High-quality communication ensured families were well informed and actively involved in their child's development. Learning stories provided rich evidence of progress and enabled meaningful contributions from home. Parents valued the opportunities to share achievements and support next steps in learning. Workshops,

informative displays and regular communication helped families develop their understanding of how children learn through play, resulting in positive impacts on learning experiences beyond the nursery.

Staff observed children attentively and used their professional judgement exceptionally well to determine when and how to intervene in play. Interactions consistently enriched children's thinking without taking control of learning. Staff adapted their approaches effectively to meet individual needs and interests, enabling all children to experience success. Through open-ended questioning, sustained shared thinking and reflective conversations, children were encouraged to test ideas, solve problems and develop resilience. They confidently expressed opinions, explored possibilities and persevered when faced with challenges.

Children's voices were central to planning. Learning experiences were highly responsive to children's interests, emerging ideas and developmental progress. Robust approaches to observation, assessment and tracking ensured learning remained broad, balanced and progressive. Staff used assessment information effectively to identify meaningful next steps, which were shared with families and reviewed regularly to support sustained progress and achievement.

Strong links with the local community enriched children's experiences and strengthened their understanding of the world around them. Meaningful partnerships with local organisations and community groups provided authentic contexts for learning. Children participated in community events, environmental projects and local celebrations, developing a strong sense of belonging and identity. These experiences were used highly effectively to deepen learning across the curriculum and support children to become confident, responsible and active members of their community.

Children are supported to achieve 5 - Very Good

Quality Indicator: Nurturing care and support

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.

Staff had created a highly nurturing environment where positive relationships were at the heart of practice. Children experienced warm, responsive and consistent care from staff who knew them well. As a result, children felt safe, secure and valued, demonstrating confidence in their interactions, play and daily experiences. Children were welcomed warmly into the setting and were encouraged to share their views, feelings and choices. They approached staff readily for comfort, reassurance and support, reflecting the strong trusting relationships that had been established.

Feedback from parents was overwhelmingly positive. Parents described the strong bonds between children and staff, sharing examples of children wanting to send messages and photographs to staff whilst on holiday and expressing excitement about returning to nursery following periods of absence. This demonstrated the meaningful relationships children had developed and the positive impact these had on their wellbeing.

Transitions were managed very effectively. Well-established routines provided children with predictability and security, while flexibility ensured individual needs were met. Home visits and nursery visits supported children and families to build relationships before enrolment, promoting positive early experiences and effective communication. Strong partnership working with the local primary school helped ensure continuity of support and enabled children to move into school with confidence.

Mealtimes were relaxed, social experiences that supported children's wellbeing and independence. Children exercised choice through flexible snack arrangements and were encouraged to take responsibility by helping prepare food, set tables and clear away dishes. Food was nutritious, attractive and promoted healthy eating habits. Staff sat with the children, enabling them to offer support, encourage discussion and keep children safe. There were a few times when staff left the table, to prepare fruit for example. Although staff were still close to the children, these times should be minimised as much as possible.

Learning about food production through activities such as growing vegetables further supported children's understanding of healthy lifestyles. During the inspection, children confidently applied these skills during community experiences, including visits to the local library.

Staff gathered and used detailed information about children to develop meaningful personal plans. These reflected children's individual needs, achievements and developmental progress and were reviewed regularly with parents. The use of the wellbeing indicators provided a holistic overview of children's experiences and enabled staff to identify and respond promptly to emerging needs.

Partnership working was a notable strength. Staff worked effectively with families and a range of professionals to ensure children received timely support. Strong communication between services contributed to consistent approaches and positive outcomes for children and families.

Staff demonstrated a thorough understanding of children and their family circumstances. This knowledge informed interactions and helped children feel recognised, respected and included. Families were offered a variety of opportunities to contribute to their child's care, learning and development, both informally and through planned meetings. Staff were proactive in addressing potential barriers to engagement, resulting in highly positive relationships with families.

Leaders and staff recognised the important role of families and communities in children's development. Opportunities for parents to share skills and participate in nursery-led initiatives, such as the Nurture in Nature project, strengthened engagement and enriched children's experiences.

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	5 - Very Good
Leadership and management of staff and resources	5 - Very Good
Children play and learn	6 - Excellent
Playing, learning and developing	6 - Excellent
Children are supported to achieve	5 - Very Good
Nurturing care and support	5 - Very Good

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Care Inspectorate
Compass House
11 Riverside Drive
Dundee
DD1 4NY

enquiries@careinspectorate.gov.scot

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