Merkinch Early Learning and Childcare Centre
Day Care of Children

Merkinch Primary School
Carse Road
Inverness
IV3 8QB

Telephone: 01463 221382

Type of inspection:
Unannounced

Completed on:
17 May 2023

Service provided by:
Highland Council

Service provider number:
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Service no:
CS2006139654

About the service

Merkinch Early Learning and Childcare is located within Merkinch Primary School in the city of Inverness. The service is registered to provide a care service to a maximum of 96 children aged 3 years to those attending primary school.

The accommodation provided is within three play rooms with direct access to a spacious outdoor play area. The outdoor play area contains a range of loose parts and open ended resources which extend and enrich the children's imaginative play and learning experiences.

About the inspection

This was an unannounced inspection visit which took place on 16 and 17 May 2023. 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 children using the service;
- reviewed email communication from parents and carers;
- spoke with staff and management;
- observed practice and daily life;
- reviewed documents.

Key messages

• Children experienced warm, caring and nurturing approaches from staff.
• Play experiences across the nursery supported the development of children's language, literacy and numeracy.
• Staff knew children well and secure relationships between them had been established.
• Thoughtfully resourced outdoor facilities offered children opportunities for learning through play.
• Effective quality assurance and self-evaluation processes supported the ongoing development of the service.
• The staff team were motivated and enthusiastic about their roles and were keen to take on training to develop their practice.

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?	4 - 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

We made an evaluation of good for this quality theme, where several strengths impacted positively on outcomes for children and clearly outweighed areas for improvement.

1.1 Nurturing care and support

Children experienced kind, warm and nurturing care from all staff members. Staff knew all children well, speaking to them with ease about their interests. One parent told us "The staff are always friendly and welcoming and I have a good relationship with them'. We saw that children were relaxed and happy and having fun with their friends and staff. This meant that children were well supported to feel safe and secure.

Children had fun and were happy and relaxed during their time in the service. We saw that they were confident around staff, and had formed trusting relationships with them. Effective use of personal planning meant that children's current needs were identified and supported. This was carried out in collaboration with families and partners to promote consistency and continuity in care. As a result, staff knew children very well and contributed to effective partnership working between families and the service.

Partnership working with parents, carers and other agencies supported information sharing, if children had additional needs, strategies and techniques were agreed, which supported their development. Regular communication and consultation meant personal plans were being routinely reviewed with parents and relevant agencies. Staff spoke knowledgably and confidently about children's individual care needs and what they did to support them. We saw staff responding throughout the day, offering kindness, reassurance and cuddles. As a result, individual children experienced care and support that was right for them.

Children enjoyed eating together in a relaxed atmosphere. The options for snack and lunch took account of current nutritional guidance as well as any allergies or dietary needs children attending may have. During snack time children served their own food which promoted opportunities for independence. Children had access to fresh water throughout the day which encouraged them to stay hydrated. During the lunch time period staff were serving the children's meals, we discussed it would be more beneficial for the children to do this themselves. This would promote independence and would enhance this experience further.

If children required medication, we confirmed it was safely stored. Appropriate information was recorded which ensured it was administered in line with best practice guidance. Accident and incident records were completed fully by the staff and shared with parents in a timely manner.

Staff understood their roles and responsibilities to keep children safe and protected from harm. They could confidently tell us how they would respond if they had any child protection concerns. This contributed to keeping children safe.

1.3 Play and learning

Children were meaningfully involved in leading their play and learning. Experiences supported children's curiosity, enquiry and creativity. They were very well supported by staff who confidently scaffolded their learning experiences, supporting their development in language, literacy and numeracy. For example, while playing at the water tray, children explored mathematical concepts around volume, capacity and measure. As a result, children were well supported to progress and achieve their potential.

Children were engaged in exciting play opportunities within the nursery block play area inside and out. Good staff interactions supported children's language development with the use of positional language to placements of interesting items. Staff interactions extended children's vocabulary by using effective questioning to support children to progress with numeracy and problem solving skills.

Play experiences provided opportunities to develop children's skills in language literacy and numeracy. The outdoor mud kitchen contained stimulating resources which enabled children to learn through real life experiences. For example, extensive loose parts promoted opportunity for children to measure and weigh. Staff understood quality interactions were at the heart of playful literacy and mathematical thinking.

Staff recognised the benefits of outdoor play and provided children with good opportunities to be outside. Children told us that they enjoyed playing outside which promoted physical energetic play to keep them active and healthy. We saw nice interactions between staff and children, with staff responsive to the individual needs of each child. For example, children were listening to a story outside in the garden while sitting on pallets and engrossed in their play. This experience provided opportunities to promote literacy, imagination and creativity.

Play and learning in the services out of school club provided opportunities to develop children's skills in language and problem solving. Staff had introduced cooking and science experiments on their weekly planner. This was clearly seen on the children's mind maps. The children were very well supported by staff who confidently scaffolded their learning experiences, supporting their development in critical thinking skills, problem-solving techniques and communication skills. This ensured children were valued and respected in the service.

Planning approaches were child centred and based on their interests. Observations of children's play and learning identified progression and highlighted areas where children needed support or challenge. This meant that children were developing a broad range of lifelong skills through their play.

How good is our setting? 4 - Good

We evaluated this key question as good where several strengths impacted positively on outcomes for children/people and clearly outweighed areas for improvement.

2.2 Children experience high quality facilities

The setting provided a warm, calm and welcoming environment for children. Children had ample space to move freely and accessed space and resources to meet their needs. They had spaces to store their belongings and furniture was of an appropriate size. The setting was a clean and well maintained space that had plenty of natural light for children to play, learn and relax in.

Children benefitted from free flow play between the indoor and outdoor area. This enabled children to have choice, direct their own play and supported them to be active and healthy. There was a range of resources available to the children including arts and crafts, small world, construction play, messy play and outdoor play. Having seen some big improvements in the indoor space, some more improvements in making the environment feel more cosy and inviting would be beneficial to create some further homely touches. This would ensure children's overall wellbeing was further supported.

Children benefited from daily energetic play and had free-flow access to an enclosed outdoor space. We saw that children were capable, confident, and happy outdoors. They had great fun exploring the

environment, and playing with their friends. Staff recognised the positive impact being outdoors had on children's wellbeing. Staff made a lot of improvements in the outdoor area since the last inspection. There were lots of more loose parts, risky play, constructive play and a large planting/digging area where the children took ownership of it. It was clear that the use of new resources and staff input had a positive impact on the children's play and learning. The staff also spoke very confidently of their plans to further develop the outdoor area. Free flow access to the outdoor spaces enabled children to be independent, direct their own play and supported them to be active and healthy. The garden provided a range of spaces for development of physical skills and exploration. The children had access to a variety of engaging and challenging resources and activities, for example, open-ended and natural resources, digging area, messy area and bikes/trikes. This supported children to develop their problem-solving skills and spark curiosity in their play experiences.

Children were helped to stay safe as the indoors and outdoors were secured. Staff worked well together to identify and address risk within the setting and during activities, so that children enjoyed and benefited from challenge. Children were also able to manage risk and know their own limits, that helped them to build resilience.

Effective infection prevention and control measures were in place. Staff understood the importance of keeping the setting clean and supported children to wash their hands at appropriate times such as before mealtimes or after toileting and nappy changes. PPE was worn when required, in line with best practice guidance, for example: during personal care, nappy changing and food preparation. This meant that children were protected from the potential spread of infection.

How good is our leadership? 5 - Very Good

We found significant strengths in aspects of the care provided and how these supported positive outcomes for children. Therefore we evaluated this key question as very good.

3.1 Quality assurance and improvement are led well

The management and staff team led in the development of quality assurance and improvement plans within the setting. Children benefitted from a culture of continuous improvement. Effective policies, procedures and quality assurance processes were in place to support the development and improvement of the service. This supported positive outcomes for children and their families.

Quality assurance systems were effective and well planned for. This included audits and monitoring of practice and children's experiences, with evidence used to inform improvements. This allowed the whole staff team to identify areas for development and action appropriately, resulting in positive outcomes for children.

The staff and management team met regularly to reflect, plan and focus on individual outcomes for children, and continual improvement. This ensured they were clear on current improvement goals and a collaborative and shared approach was applied. An effective cycle of reflection, self-evaluation and implementation of improvements impacted positively on outcomes for children and their families.

A realistic improvement plan was driving forward nursery developments. Priorities were outcome focussed with realistic targets. Staff also felt confident and spoke about their leadership areas while looking at improvements and evaluating termly with best practice documents. These planned improvements were led well and impacted positively on the development of the service. These opportunities ensured that everyone

working in the service felt valued and listened to as part of the service's ongoing improvement work. This contributed to a positive team ethos and a sense of shared purpose and vision.

How good is our staff team? 4 - Good

We evaluated this key question as good where several strengths impacted positively on outcomes for children/people and clearly outweighed areas for improvement.

4.3 Staff deployment

The management team recognised and valued the importance of ensuring that the service was appropriately staffed at all times. Children benefited from a staff team from a reduced ratio with a range of knowledge, skills and experience which was clearly seen to support children's play and learning. There was a strong sense of team work. Staff spoke positively about the relationships and team working ethos within the service. They felt valued and listened to, which had created a sense of pride in their work. The management team had carefully considered the mix of skills, experience and knowledge of the staff team in each room. This had resulted in the formation of a strong staff team who were able to support one another and share their knowledge and skills.

Positive relationships with the team meant that staff communicated well with each other to ensure children were safe and supported appropriately. Staff were flexible and breaks were planned to minimise the impact on children whilst making sure staff had time to rest and be refreshed. Staff had clear roles, were flexible and moved with children dependant on their interests and needs, for example, when children wanted to go outdoors and members of staff went out with them. Staff placed themselves thoughtfully during busier times to ensure all children's individual needs were well considered. As a result, children benefitted from a very calm and positive experience.

Staff knew children well and secure relationships between them had been established. We witnessed children being supported by staff in ways which were appropriate to meet their needs. This meant that children felt safe, secure and happy in a service where a caring staff team nurtured and supported them. Busier times of the day, such as pickups/drops off were well managed. Staff were fully aware of the measures in place to keep children safe at these times.

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

Requirements

Requirement 1

By 30 June, the provider must ensure each child receives appropriate care and support and their needs are met. To do this, the provider must, at a minimum:

a) ensure personal plans set out children's current needs and how they will be met.

b) ensure all staff are aware of and understand the information within the personal plans and use this to effectively meet each child's needs.
c) ensure personal plans are regularly reviewed and updated in partnership with parents.

This is to comply with Regulation 5(1)(2) – (Personal plans) of The Social Care and Social Work Improvement Scotland (Requirements for Care Services) Regulations 2011 (SSI 2011/210). (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, which state that:
'My personal plan (sometimes referred to as a care plan) is right for right for me because it sets out how my needs will be met, as well as my wishes and choices.'
(HSCS 1.15)

This requirement was made on 4 May 2022.

Action taken on previous requirement

Personal plans were currently updated and in place for all children with current information on their needs, wishes and how they would be met. We saw how staff used information in the personal plans to support children and meet their needs effectively. Children's personal plans were regularly reviewed and updated in partnership with parents. ELC room handbooks are in now in place with essential information for ELC supply staff. This ensures all staff working in a room are familiar with and can use strategies that support the needs of the children.

Ongoing Needs, Developmental Overviews and Pre-School Form 1s are now in an easily accessible folder in each room. These were shown at the follow up inspection and they are categorised into keyworker groups.

Met - within timescales

Requirement 2

By 29 August 2022, 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 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 4 May 2022.

Action taken on previous requirement

The service is now operating in a 1:7 ratio, rather than 1:8.

In addition to the 1:7 ratio, the staff team has increased in number and there is a support worker in each of the 3 rooms.

Staff are being supported very well by management, and staff are engaging in a Words Up Mentorship. This gives staff the opportunity to model high quality interactions and support newer members of staff with this, including providing relevant peer evaluations. As a result, children received positive experiences.

Met - within timescales

Requirement 3

By 30 August 2022, the provider must ensure positive outcomes for the children using the service. To do this the provider must ensure the manager has sufficient time allocated to undertake the role effectively.

This is to comply with Regulation 4 (1)(a)(b) (welfare of Users) of The Social Care and Social Work Improvement Scotland (Requirements for Care Services) Regulations 2011(SSI 2011/10)

This is to ensure care and support is consistent with the Health and Social Care Standards, which state that: 'I use a service and organisation that are well led and managed.' (HSCS 4.23).

This requirement was made on 4 May 2022.

Action taken on previous requirement
The service was appropriately staffed to promote the health, wellbeing, and safety of children.

Principal Teacher (Early Years) now has 0.5 FTE allocated to leading the ELC, rather than the 0.4 FTE previously.

The Principal teacher and senior early years practitioner are working together very well and have reviewed monitoring calendar and the use of this will ensure regular monitoring is taking place consistently. Staff observations plan to take place termly and will provide staff with feedback and next steps. The leadership team had considered the complexity of the needs of individual children and enough staff were available to offer individualised care and support. As a result, children received safe and positive experiences.

Met - within timescales

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?	4 - Good
4.3 Staff deployment	4 - Good

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