

Stepping Stones Nursery Ellon Day Care of Children

Castle Park Industrial Estate
Ellon
AB41 9RG

Telephone: 01358 724 343

Type of inspection:
Unannounced

Completed on:
28 May 2026

Service provided by:
Stepping Stones Nurseries
(Peterhead) Limited

Service provider number:
SP2004939139

Service no:
CS2009195509

About the service

Stepping Stones Nursery Ellon is located in purpose-built accommodation on Castle Park Industrial Estate, Ellon. The service is registered to provide a care service to a maximum of 49 children not yet attending primary school at any one time, of whom no more than nine may be aged under two years.

The accommodation provides a baby room and an open-plan playroom for children aged two and over. It is surrounded by an extensive outdoor play area. It is close to local shops, parks, and other community services.

About the inspection

This was an unannounced inspection which took place on 26 May 2026 between 08:45 and 17:45, 27 May 2026 between 08:30 and 12:30, and 28 May 2026 between 10:00 and 11:30. 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:

- interacted with children using the service and five of their parents/carers
- received 20 completed questionnaires from families
- received six completed questionnaires from staff
- spoke with staff and management
- observed practice and daily experiences
- reviewed documents
- assessed core assurances, including the physical environment.

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 consistent, nurturing, and responsive care.
- Children enjoyed nutritious meals and snacks.
- Children were happy, engaged, and independent learners, benefitting from improved environments and positive interactions.
- Children were well supervised and kept safe during play.
- Effective leadership, quality assurance, and self evaluation supported ongoing improvement, leading to improved care and positive outcomes for children and families.

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	4 - Good
Children are supported to achieve	4 - Good

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

Leadership 4 - Good

Leadership and management of staff and resources

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.

Leaders within the setting had worked hard to make improvements, support staff, and create conditions where everyone felt confident to initiate change. They valued and made good use of support from the local authority, which helped to drive improvements across the service. Roles and responsibilities for management were clearly defined. This enabled the manager to spend more time with staff and children, model good practice, and support staff development. As a result, staff practice and staff morale had improved.

Quality assurance processes were in place and contributed to improved outcomes for children and families. The manager effectively implemented and shared a quality assurance calendar, resulting in increased staff involvement. Policies, procedures, and risk assessments were reviewed and strengthened, supporting a safer and more consistent approach. Audits of accidents, incidents, and medication identified risks and led to appropriate action, including the removal of cupboard doors to reduce hazards. Reviews of children's personal and support plans, alongside key worker meetings, promoted consistent, well informed care from staff who knew the children well.

The service's vision, values, and aims were clear and displayed for parents. They reflected the aspirations of families attending the service and helped them to understand what to expect. Staff had been encouraged to reflect on these values, which led to increased confidence in their roles and responsibilities. As a result, the values were clearly reflected in the caring practice observed.

Staff were enthusiastic and committed to improving the service. They were supported to take responsibility for ongoing development and discussed feeling listened to through regular team meetings, supervision, and appraisals. They had begun to use national guidance to reflect on practice and identify priorities for improvement, including reviewing planning approaches to better meet children's needs. Monitoring of practice had been introduced, resulting in a clearer, shared understanding of standards and expectations. Regular feedback supported staff to recognise strengths and areas for development, leading to increased confidence and a stronger sense of ownership of improvement.

Ways of involving parents and families in self evaluation had improved. Parents spoke positively about the introduction of a digital communication app, which supported more regular sharing of information and created opportunities for feedback. Some parents had formed a committee, providing them with a voice to share their views. This also supported fundraising and created further opportunities for parents to be involved in the service. A parent commented, "I have seen improvements in the service since inspection in regards to communication, organisation, and giving opportunities for parents' voices to be heard."

Staff were recruited safely and supported through an effective induction process. This included a mentor and training opportunities tailored to their individual needs. As a result, staff grew in confidence and were clear about their roles and responsibilities.

Children play and learn **4 - Good****Play, learning and developing**

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.

Children were happy, busy, and actively engaged in their play. They made choices about where and how they played, supporting their independence and confidence. Free flow between indoor and outdoor areas enabled children to explore their interests and develop physical skills.

Since the previous inspection, significant improvements had been made to the indoor play environments. Playrooms were well organised into defined areas that supported a range of experiences. The use of natural materials and open-ended resources encouraged creativity and imagination. For example, children independently accessed mark-making resources and incorporated writing into their play, supporting early literacy development.

Children were developing a sense of responsibility for their environment. They were encouraged to tidy and care for resources, supporting their understanding of shared spaces and routines. Children were encouraged to make safe choices when playing and were well supervised to help keep them safe.

The outdoor environment was well used and enjoyed by the children. Babies were excited to play outdoors and engaged well in the large garden, enjoying the ball pit and wheeled toys. The garden used by older children was less inviting, with fewer high quality resources to support their interests and provide children with appropriate challenge. A parent commented, "Children appear to get outside a lot of the time but the resources for outdoors appear to be limited and would benefit from an update." The manager advised that this was part of the ongoing improvement plan.

Staff interactions were warm, responsive, and supportive. Staff showed genuine interest in children's ideas and engaged alongside them in play. They supported learning through everyday experiences, including counting, recognising colours, and engaging in conversations during routines. These interactions contributed to children developing skills in literacy and numeracy.

Planning approaches had recently changed and staff spoke positively about the impact on children's learning experiences and levels of engagement. Responsive and intentional planning was used and displayed on a shared planning wall in the playroom. This supported staff to feel more involved and confident in contributing ideas based on children's interests. For example, staff discussed children's interest in ladybirds and how this was developed through play experiences, such as exploring colours in the creative area.

Observations of children at play were recorded and shared with parents through the Family app, ensuring they were informed about their child's learning. Observations were detailed and included an evaluation and next steps. For younger children, these were appropriate to their age and stage. For a few older children, next steps were not always clearly linked to the evaluation. For example, one observation focused on gross motor skills, while the next step related to schema play. To support greater depth and challenge in learning, staff should continue to develop their understanding of identifying meaningful and relevant next steps.

Nurturing care and support

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.

Staff were consistently kind, caring, and respectful, supporting children to feel safe, secure, and valued. Children demonstrated positive attachments and were supported sensitively with their emotional needs and daily transitions. Calm, consistent approaches helped promote confidence and emotional security.

Opportunities for rest and sleep were well supported. Comfortable spaces in the baby room and an inviting sensory room provided children with calm environments to rest and relax. Personal care routines were carried out with dignity and clean, well organised spaces, including new sinks, supported effective infection prevention and smoother daily routines.

Children experienced positive snack and mealtimes. They were offered nutritious and appetising meals, with alternatives provided when needed. Children were encouraged to develop independence through opportunities to self serve. Staff provided effective supervision to keep children safe and most were attentive, engaging them in conversation. This created a calm, social experience where children enjoyed eating. Water was readily available, helping to ensure children remained well hydrated.

Children's personal plans had been reviewed and new formats introduced. These were stored effectively in folders, supporting staff access, and regular key worker meetings ensured they were up-to-date and relevant. Parents were involved in the process, helping to ensure plans reflected each child's individual needs.

Support plans were in place for some children and included clear, easy-to-follow strategies. Key strategies were highlighted on the front page, supporting consistent care and support. For example, one child's plan identified that they liked to help and this was observed in practice.

Where appropriate, other agencies were involved in developing strategies. Chronologies were included within personal plans, identifying significant events in a child's life that may impact their health and wellbeing. Any actions taken when supporting children and their families were clearly recorded, helping ensure information was not missed. This meant children and families received the care and support they needed.

Most parents had developed positive relationships with staff. They commented, "My child loves coming here and they always make them feel welcome," "It's a fantastic nurturing environment," and "I like the staff." They valued the Family app for improving communication and some found displays in the hallway, such as staff pictures, guidance, and local support groups, helpful. The calmer environment, alongside targeted support to develop staff confidence in communicating with parents, contributed to increased levels of engagement and more effective information sharing. A parent commented, "Staff are amazing, we are always greeted with positive, happy attitudes and receive a detailed handover at the end of each session." Opportunities were ongoing to strengthen relationships further. For example, by inviting family members to share their experiences. Improving parental engagement had been identified as a priority within the service improvement plan and was ongoing.

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

Requirements

Requirement 1

By 27 April 2026, the provider must implement effective quality assurance systems and self evaluation to ensure high quality experiences and positive outcomes for children and families.

To do this, the provider must at a minimum:

- a) Involve staff, children, and families in self evaluation, using national guidance and practice documents to support reflection and improvement.
- b) Ensure staff understand and implement the service's vision, values, and aims, ensuring these are evident in daily practice and decision making.
- c) Undertake a training needs analysis to identify what training and development is required and ensure staff are supported to complete this.
- d) Ensure effective monitoring of staff practice to support improvement and ensure high quality provision is sustained.
- e) Evaluate the effectiveness of staff training and development opportunities and ongoing competencies of staff.

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

This is to comply with Section 8(1)(a) of the Health and Care (Staffing) (Scotland) Act 2019.

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).

This requirement was made on 22 January 2026.

Action taken on previous requirement

Effective quality assurance systems and self evaluation processes were in place to ensure high quality experiences and positive outcomes for children and families.

- a) Staff discussed increased involvement in self evaluation. They had used the challenge questions within the 'Quality Improvement Framework for Early Learning and Childcare Sectors' to identify what they were doing well and areas for improvement. A current focus included evaluating staff practice in supporting children to become independent learners. The Family app was used to gather feedback by polling families and collecting their suggestions.

b) Staff had been supported to reflect on each of the service's values and describe how these were being met in practice. This increased their understanding of their responsibilities and the expectations of families. As a result, the service's vision, values, and aims were reflected in daily practice.

c) All staff had completed a training needs analysis, which was recorded in their CPD (continuous professional development) folders. Following the previous inspection, staff had completed training in the Curiosity Approach, interactions, and supporting two year olds, ensuring identified development needs were addressed.

d) Monitoring systems had been implemented and were ongoing. Observations of staff practice had been carried out, with feedback provided using a "two stars and a wish" approach, which staff found helpful. Ongoing discussions with key workers had been introduced to ensure children's next steps were reflected in planning and that individual needs were being met.

e) All staff had completed evaluations of training, which were discussed during support and supervision sessions, held twice yearly, and annual appraisals. This ensured that training was effective and that staff competencies were maintained and developed.

Met - within timescales

Requirement 2

By 27 April 2026, the provider must ensure children experience high quality play and learning that supports their development.

To do this, the provider must at a minimum ensure:

a) The environment and resources offer sufficient challenge, promotes curiosity, and provides meaningful learning opportunities.

b) Staff interactions effectively support and extend children's play and learning, including the use of effective questioning.

c) Children are supported to lead their own learning and have fun through meaningful learning experiences, both indoors and outdoors.

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

This is to comply with Section 7(1)(a) of the Health and Care (Staffing) (Scotland) Act 2019.

This is to ensure that care and support is consistent with the Health and Social Care Standards (HSCS) which state that: 'As a child, I can direct my own play and activities in the way that I choose and freely access a wide range of experiences and resources suitable for my age and stage, which stimulate my natural curiosity, learning, and creativity' (HSCS 2.27); and 'I am supported to achieve my potential in my education and employment if this is right for me' (HSCS 1.27).

This requirement was made on 22 January 2026.

Action taken on previous requirement

Children experienced high quality play and learning that supported their development.

- a) The environment offered sufficient challenge, promoted curiosity, and provided meaningful learning opportunities. It was welcoming and well maintained. Staff had responsibility for specific play zones, which ensured areas were regularly refreshed and well resourced with age- and stage-appropriate materials. For example, the water wall provided an engaging experience, with a variety of tubes and guttering for exploration. The creative area was well resourced, offering a range of materials to support writing and early mark-making opportunities.
- b) Staff interactions more effectively supported and extended children's play and learning. Staff were observed to be more meaningfully engaged with children, getting down to their level, listening to their ideas, and supporting their thinking.
- c) Children were supported to lead their own learning and experienced enjoyment through meaningful play opportunities, both indoors and outdoors. Children appeared happy and engaged. They were able to choose where they wanted to play and explain their choices. Free access to the outdoor area had been provided throughout the session, supporting a range of play experiences.

Met - within timescales**Requirement 3**

By 27 April 2026, the provider must safeguard children and ensure they experience consistent, nurturing care that meets their individual needs.

To do this, the provider must at a minimum ensure:

- a) Staff respond consistently and sensitively to children's emotional cues, communication, and individual needs.
- b) Children's dignity and privacy are respected and they are cared for in a calm, safe, and secure environment.
- c) Staff effectively supervise children and implement practices to keep them safe and supported.

This is to comply with Section 7(1)(a) of the Health and Care (Staffing) (Scotland) Act 2019.

This is to ensure that care and support is consistent with the Health and Social Care Standards (HSCS) which state that: 'I experience high quality care because people have the necessary information and resources' (HSCS 4.27); and 'I have confidence in people because they are trained, competent and skilled, are able to reflect on their practice, and follow their professional and organisational codes' (HSCS 3.14).

This requirement was made on 22 January 2026.

Action taken on previous requirement

Children were safeguarded and experienced consistent, nurturing care that met their individual needs.

- a) Staff interactions were positive and generally consistent. Staff were observed getting down to children's level, showing interest in their play and engaging in meaningful conversations. They responded sensitively

to children's communication and emotional cues. Staff were also welcoming to families on arrival, helping to support positive relationships and transitions.

b) Children's dignity and privacy were respected. Staff demonstrated sensitivity during personal care routines, such as toilet training, where children were invited discreetly and supported appropriately. The environment was calm, safe, and secure, supporting children to feel comfortable and cared for.

c) Staff deployment had improved, supporting more effective supervision of children. Staff were well positioned within the environment, enabling them to keep children safe while also recognising when children required help or support. This contributed to children feeling secure and well supported.

Met - within timescales

Requirement 4

By 27 April 2026, the provider must ensure children receive consistent, nurturing care that meets their individual care and support needs.

To do this, the provider must at a minimum ensure:

- a) All personal plans are accurate, up-to-date, and reflect each child's current needs, interests, and routines.
- b) That strategies to support children are clear, easy to follow, and consistently implemented by all staff.
- c) Personal plans are reviewed with families at least every six months or sooner if needs change and that families are fully involved in updating information.
- d) Staff are familiar with, understand, and consistently use personal plans to inform daily care, support, and practices.

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

This is to comply with Section 7(1)(a) of the Health and Care (Staffing) (Scotland) Act 2019.

This is to ensure that care and support is consistent with the Health and Social Care Standards (HSCS) which state that: 'My care and support meets my needs and is right for me' (HSCS 1.19).

This requirement was made on 22 January 2026.

Action taken on previous requirement

Children received consistent, nurturing care that met their individual care and support needs.

- a) Personal plans had been reviewed and updated, with new formats introduced to improve clarity and relevance. These were regularly discussed during key worker meetings to ensure that information remained accurate and reflected each child's current needs, interests, and routines.
- b) Clear strategies had been developed to support individual children's needs. These were easy to follow and were clearly displayed at the top of each personal plan, supporting consistency in how all staff implemented them in practice.

c) All personal plans had been reviewed in partnership with families. Families were involved in updating information, ensuring plans reflected current needs and circumstances. Reviews had taken place at least every six months or sooner where changes had been identified.

d) Staff were familiar with and understood the content of personal plans and used them to inform daily care and practice. Children were cared for by staff who knew them well and consistently followed the agreed strategies within their support plans, helping to ensure their needs were met effectively.

Met - within timescales

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's wellbeing and ensure parents are kept informed, the provider should improve the reliability and timeliness of communication.

This includes but is not exhaustive to:

a) Where an app is used addressing connection issues.

b) Ensuring staff follow clear procedures for sharing accurate and prompt updates about children's care.

This is to ensure that care and support is consistent with the Health and Social Care Standards (HSCS) which state that: 'I experience high quality care and support based on relevant evidence, guidance, and best practice' (HSCS 4.11).

This area for improvement was made on 23 October 2025.

Action taken since then

Communication systems had improved to support children's wellbeing and ensure parents were kept informed in a timely and reliable way.

a) The Family app had been introduced and was being used to support communication with families. Families spoke positively about its use. The service reported no connection issues which had impacted negatively on its use.

b) Staff had followed clearer procedures for sharing information, ensuring updates about children's care were accurate and shared promptly. This supported more consistent communication and helped keep families well informed about their child's experiences and wellbeing.

This area for improvement has been met.

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	4 - Good
Playing, learning and developing	4 - Good
Children are supported to achieve	4 - Good
Nurturing care and support	4 - Good

To find out more

This inspection report is published by the Care Inspectorate. You can download this report and others from our website.

Care services in Scotland cannot operate unless they are registered with the Care Inspectorate. We inspect, award grades and help services to improve. We also investigate complaints about care services and can take action when things aren't good enough.

Please get in touch with us if you would like more information or have any concerns about a care service.

You can also read more about our work online at www.careinspectorate.com

Contact us

Care Inspectorate
Compass House
11 Riverside Drive
Dundee
DD1 4NY

enquiries@careinspectorate.com

0345 600 9527

Find us on Facebook

Twitter: @careinspect

Other languages and formats

This report is available in other languages and formats on request.

Tha am foillseachadh seo ri fhaighinn ann an cruthannan is cànan eile ma nithear iartras.

অনুরোধসাপেক্ষে এই প্রকাশনাটি অন্য ফরম্যাট এবং অন্যান্য ভাষায় পাওয়া যায়।

یہ اشاعت درخواست کرنے پر دیگر شکلوں اور دیگر زبانوں میں فراہم کی جاسکتی ہے۔

ਬੇਨਤੀ 'ਤੇ ਇਹ ਪ੍ਰਕਾਸ਼ਨ ਹੋਰ ਰੂਪਾਂ ਅਤੇ ਹੋਰਨਾਂ ਭਾਸ਼ਾਵਾਂ ਵਿਚ ਉਪਲਬਧ ਹੈ।

هذه الوثيقة متوفرة بلغات ونماذج أخرى عند الطلب

本出版品有其他格式和其他語言備索。

Na życzenie niniejsza publikacja dostępna jest także w innych formatach oraz językach.