

Early learning and childcare settings

Across the early learning and childcare sector inspectors noted many strengths. The quality of children's learning experiences was one of the most common strengths highlighted in inspections. Staff generally promoted children's engagement and motivation in their own learning effectively. This supported children to be confident. Staff have positive relationships with children and families. They know children well and used this knowledge to support children to make progress in their learning.

Overall, staff have responded well to national guidance, including Curriculum for Excellence. As we look ahead to the next stage of the expansion of early learning and childcare, it is vital that staff continue to work to ensure high-quality learning experiences, particularly for those children under three years of age. There is also a need to improve approaches to self-evaluation, including the impact of the curriculum, in developing children's skills for learning, life and work.

How well do children learn and achieve?

Over the period of this report, inspectors increasingly observed children taking more responsibility for their learning. They found that staff were generally skilled at developing warm, supportive relationships with children. Staff listened to children's views and responded to their interests when planning learning. As a result, children were motivated and increasingly engaged. We have seen children becoming more confident in talking about their learning. Inspectors observed children most actively involved in their learning when activities were suited to their stage of development and staff supported them to extend their own ideas and thinking using high-quality questioning and discussion.

In settings where children were less engaged or motivated, inspectors found that activities were too structured and staff were not skilled enough in using learning conversations with children. Staff must now ensure that all children, including those under three years of age, have consistently high-quality learning experiences.

Overall, inspectors found that staff provided appropriate support to enable children to learn and use new vocabulary, including mathematical language in interesting contexts. Most children listened and talked well for a variety of purposes. They showed a keen interest in books and enjoyed sharing stories with adults. This was most evident in settings where regular storytelling was prioritised. We observed children developing their early writing skills in a range of relevant and meaningful contexts. At times, children were encouraged to copy words before they were ready to do so. It is important for staff to have a clear understanding of progression in early writing development. We found that most children were developing their counting skills well through a range of learning experiences. Over the period of this report, increasingly these experiences offered opportunities to develop children's early numeracy skills. There is more to be done to ensure staff develop children's skills and confidence in all areas of numeracy and mathematics.

Overall, children were developing their inquiry and investigative skills well. In the most effective practice, inspectors noted that children could apply these skills when exploring and observing real-life materials and artefacts. In doing so, children talked about their findings, identified similarities and differences and made predictions. This type of learning was helping children make progress in their learning about sciences through real-life opportunities.

How well do early learning and childcare settings support children to develop and learn?

Overall, inspectors found that staff have engaged very well with implementation of Curriculum for Excellence. As settings have reviewed and refreshed their curriculum staff have become more confident in using Curriculum for Excellence principles, experiences and outcomes to plan children's learning to develop the four capacities. In doing so, they have worked well with children, parents and local communities to enhance and enrich the curriculum. Settings should now ensure the curriculum is relevant to the local context and meets children's learning needs. Inspectors noted that, currently, there are still too many instances where the rationale for the curriculum is not clearly defined or understood well enough by staff. Staff need to ensure the curriculum develops children's skills for learning, life and work and provides appropriate levels of choice, depth and challenge across all areas of learning.

We have seen staff increase the opportunities for children to take part in high-quality outdoor play. In the most effective practice, the outdoor environment was used as an integral part of the learning environment. As a result of staff focusing on how to improve children's literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing across learning, the majority now plan and provide a literacy-rich environment to support children's learning. Where practice was strong, inspectors noted that staff provided play opportunities that were open-ended and stimulated children to be innovative and creative.

Inspectors have observed children engaging in a broader range of experiences involving technologies and digital technologies. This resulted in children having many opportunities to use computers and tablets to help reinforce their emerging literacy and numeracy skills. Where children benefited from high-quality learning in technologies, inspectors saw a significant positive impact on children's knowledge and skills development.

In settings where children's learning needs were met effectively, inspectors highlighted that staff understood the individual circumstances of children who attended the setting and had high levels of respect for children and their families. They were skilled in recognising and supporting children with barriers to learning, including those who were vulnerable. Staff were making effective use of partnerships with families and other agencies to inform any support or interventions put in place.

There remains scope for staff to improve how they use observations of learning to track and monitor children's progress. Inspectors noted that where this was most effective, staff were skilled at observing children during play and used this information to identify and plan children's next steps in learning. In doing so, they provided learning activities at the correct level of difficulty. However, we observed too many settings where information gathered was not used well enough to plan activities at the right level of difficulty.

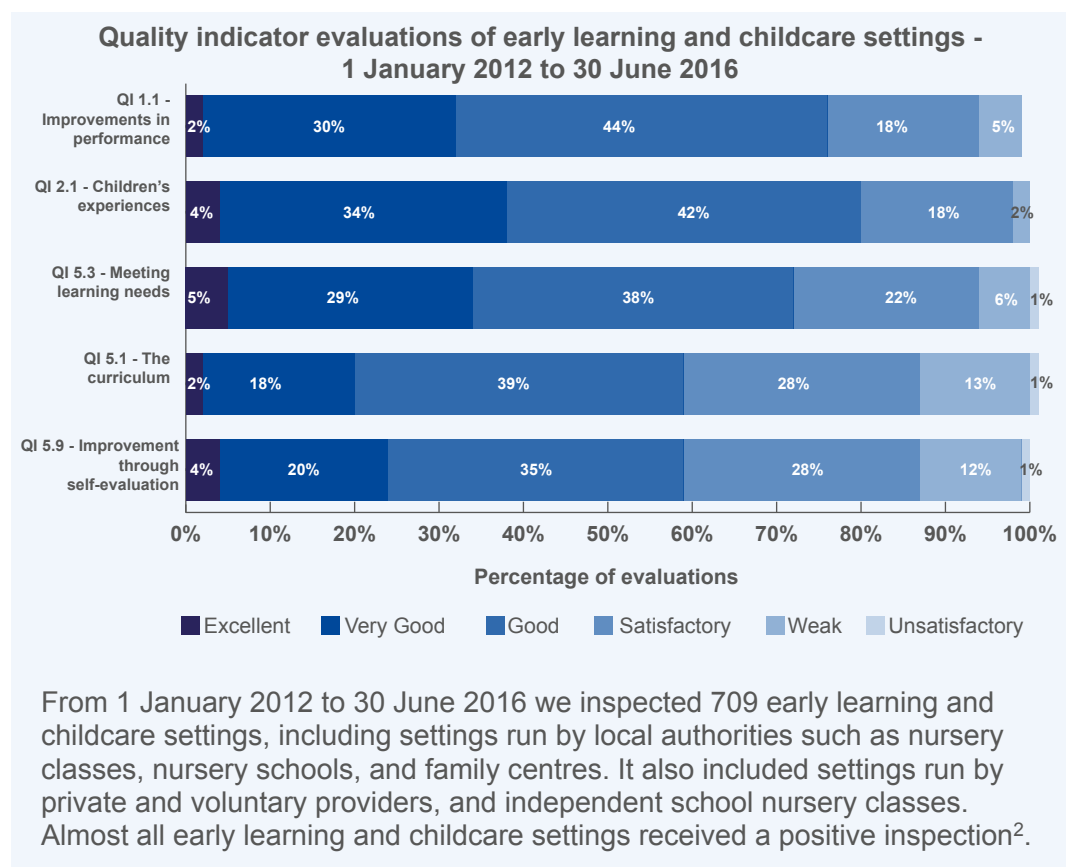
Overall, in settings inspected, staff continued to provide strong pastoral support for children as they moved through early learning and on to primary school. They were flexible in their approaches to support children make a positive move from home or from another setting. Staff now need to continue to improve how they ensure children have continuous progression in their learning during key transition stages.

How well do early learning and childcare settings improve the quality of their work?

We found that most settings were well led. In the most effective settings, staff took on leadership roles to develop their own practice and aspects of the learning environment. In these settings, national guidance, such as [Building the Ambition](#), was used well to support improvement.

Evidence gathered by inspectors shows that the use of self-evaluation to support improvement is a key development need for the sector. Staff were increasingly aware that self-evaluation will support them to improve. They have become more confident in identifying what their setting does well and what it needs to do to improve further. Where this was most effective, individuals took responsibility for contributing to and leading identified improvement priorities. However, overall, approaches to self-evaluation were variable. In particular approaches to tracking and monitoring children's progress were not consistently robust.

While arrangements to support professional learning among early learning and childcare staff have improved, inspectors noted that this was not consistent across the sector. In some cases it was challenging for early learning and childcare staff to access professional learning opportunities to help them take forward identified areas for improvement. Where this was working well, we observed individual staff who were more active and empowered to develop their professional competence and understanding. This resulted in staff contributing more to collaborative improvement and development within settings. There needs to be a continued focus on improving professional development of staff to support the expansion of hours for early learning and childcare. This includes ensuring staff are well prepared to meet the needs of entitled two year olds effectively and provide high-quality learning and development for children over longer daily and weekly sessions.



² Satisfactory or better in each of the following quality indicators: improvements in performance, learners' experiences and meeting learning needs in settings inspected between January 2012 and June 2016

Designing the curriculum

At Tynecastle Nursery School, City of Edinburgh Council, children, staff, parents, partners and the wider community work in partnership to support children's learning. Together they developed a shared understanding of what children's learning looks like in their setting. They produced a clear visual 'map' of their curriculum. It reflected their vision that learning is child-centred. The curriculum is designed to enable staff to be highly responsive to children's ideas and interests. For example, children's curiosity about rocks found in the garden led to research about other types of rock and volcanoes. Staff arranged an outing to a museum to extend and deepen children's knowledge further. This approach helps to make children's learning meaningful and challenging and supports children to become confident in sharing their learning. Parents are extremely positive about the work of the setting describing it as 'a temple of learning and a training ground for future citizens'.

Improving learner voice

In Ferguslie Pre-five Centre, Renfrewshire Council, children have personalised, achievable, specific targets for literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing. Parents and children work together with staff to help



identify focused and appropriate next steps in learning. Staff take time to listen carefully to children's and parents' ideas, sometimes using their knowledge of child development to set out smaller more achievable goals. Almost all children talk with ease about what they are interested in and what they would like to learn next. As a result, children talk confidently about what they enjoy learning and how some of their skills such as drawing or counting have developed.

Staff meet with parents regularly to discuss children's progress in achieving their targets. Everyone shares a commitment to, and understanding of, the progress children make in their learning.