

Summarised inspection findings

Stepping Stones Nursery

Argyll and Bute

11 March 2025

Key contextual information

Stepping Stones Nursery is situated in an adapted house in a residential area of Helensburgh, Argyll & Bute. The nursery is a privately owned business, in partnership with Argyll & Bute Council to provide funded early learning and childcare (ELC). This includes funded places for two-year-old children. The nursery consists of one playroom divided across the upstairs area and a large indoor space downstairs. Children in the downstairs area of the house access the outdoor area freely.

Children attend from the age of two until starting primary school. The nursery is registered for 36 children, and the current roll is 32. The nursery operates between 8 am – 5.30 pm, Monday to Friday, across the full year. Children have various patterns of attendance, including part and full-time placements, during term time and across the year.

Staffing consists of a nursery manager, two recently appointed team leaders and a team of practitioners. The manager has been in post for one year and is due to leave the nursery at the end of 2024. The nursery has had significant staffing issues in the past year and recruitment of new staff has been challenging. A new manager has been recruited. They had not yet commenced their post at the time of the inspection.

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| 1.3 Leadership of change | weak |
| <p>This indicator focuses on working together at all levels to develop a shared vision for change and improvement which reflects the context of the setting within its community. Planning for continuous improvement change should be evidence-based and clearly linked to strong self-evaluation. Senior leaders should ensure that the pace of change is well judged and appropriate to have a positive impact on outcomes for children. The themes are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ developing a shared vision, values and aims relevant to the setting and its community■ strategic planning for continuous improvement■ implementing improvement and change | |

- In the past year, the manager has made positive changes to improve the culture of the nursery, by working collaboratively with practitioners. There is now a nurturing and inclusive ethos where children, parents and visitors are welcome. The manager is supporting practitioners well to be a cohesive team. As a result, teamwork and communication has improved greatly.
- The manager leads the team well and provides guidance and support to practitioners to help them make positive improvements such as implementing the nurture principles. The quality and frequency of parental engagement has also improved. The manager values parents' views. Parents have supported the manager to create a helpful nursery handbook.
- The manager, practitioners and parents are currently refreshing the nursery vision, values and aims to reflect better the nurturing and inclusive ethos of the nursery. Building on this positive start with parents, practitioners should gather the views of children as part of their practice. Currently, children do not yet contribute regularly to the life and work of their nursery.
- Practitioners are enthusiastic and keen to take forward projects to improve children's experiences and learning. For example, they support children's early communication and language skills positively through sign language and the use of books, songs and rhymes. As practitioners build their knowledge and gain confidence, these leadership roles could be extended to include all of the team.

- The manager encourages practitioners positively to access professional learning. This is helping them to develop their knowledge and practice further. Once the new manager commences the post, focused professional learning on Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) needs to take place as a matter of priority. Almost all practitioners do not yet have sufficient knowledge and understanding to implement a coherent curriculum that results in high quality experiences for children. In addition, they should revisit national guidance, Realising the Ambition: Being Me (2020) to develop a shared understanding of early years pedagogy in practice.
- The manager is beginning to involve practitioners in self-evaluation activities to encourage them to be reflective. Practitioners do not yet have a full understanding of self-evaluation for improvement. Senior leaders and practitioners now need to use quality frameworks to drive improvement. As a matter of priority, they should have a clear focus on statutory duties, curriculum and improving the planning, assessment and recording of children's learning.
- The leadership of the nursery is in a period of instability. The owner must now ensure the nursery has strong and effective leadership. This is required to embed the positive improvements already made, and to take action on the important improvements identified in this report.

2.3 Learning, teaching and assessment

satisfactory

This indicator focuses on ensuring high quality learning experience for young children. It highlights the importance of a very good understanding of child development and early learning pedagogy. Effective use is made of observation to inform future learning and identify the progress made. Children are involved in planning for their own learning. Together these ensure children's successes and achievements are maximised. The themes are:

- learning and engagement
- quality of interactions
- effective use of assessment
- planning, tracking and monitoring

Children aged under three

- Children settle well into nursery as a result of the positive and responsive relationships they have with practitioners. In the last year, the team have improved the learning spaces. They have introduced new resources, including a wide range of natural and open-ended materials. Children use these resources meaningfully to support their stage of development. Moving forward, practitioners should continue to develop their planning to ensure this builds on high quality observations of children's learning and development. It is important for practitioners to make sure that all experiences for children under three, are developmentally appropriate.

Children aged three and above

- Children and parents receive a warm welcome at the gate as they arrive at nursery. The ethos of the nursery demonstrates a commitment to children's rights. Practitioners support children well to make choices and decisions about where they wish to play and share their interests and ideas.
- Overall, children play well together. At times, they require support from an adult to resolve minor conflicts. They would benefit from practitioners using a consistent restorative approach. They need to help children to share how they feel and recognise the impact their actions can have on others. Almost all practitioners could make better use of visual aids to help children communicate their needs more effectively.
- Children have the opportunity to move freely between the playroom and the outdoor area. Most children engage well during free-flow play, accessing a range of interesting experiences. Practitioners must make sure that they plan experiences at the right level for children. A minority of children are not able to sustain interest when sitting in larger groups. Most children, when playing outdoors, use open-ended materials imaginatively. For example, they create obstacle courses and make pretend soup in the mud kitchen.
- Practitioners' interactions with children are kind, caring and nurturing. This helps children to feel safe and secure within the nursery. The quality of interactions to support and extend children's learning is not yet consistent across the team. Practitioners need to gain a deeper understanding of how children learn, early years pedagogy and put this into practice consistently. Children have access to a few types of digital technology. Practitioners and children would benefit from using technology that could support learning and teaching more effectively.
- Each child has an online journal which includes practitioners' observations and photographs of them at play. The quality of most observations recorded by practitioners is inconsistent. Almost all practitioners should have a clearer and more consistent focus on the skills children are developing. To do this, practitioners require professional learning, and robust support and

guidance. Parents have the opportunity to contribute to their child's learning journal. Building on this, practitioners could more consistently provide useful ideas to help parents support children's learning through play at home.

- Practitioners respond positively to children's ideas and interests and provide resources and interesting experiences to support this. A long-term plan sets out seasonal events, festivals and key community events that children will have the opportunity to engage in through nursery experiences. Practitioners are not yet planning for children's learning using the experiences and outcomes from CfE.
- Practitioners maintain individual trackers for each child which outline key developmental milestones and literacy and numeracy skills being developed or achieved. These trackers should be used more effectively to demonstrate a more accurate picture of children's progress. The information recorded in the trackers needs to be based on high quality observations and sound professional judgement. Practitioners know children well as individuals. They now need to know them better as learners.

2.2 Curriculum: Learning and development pathways

- Currently, the flow of the day allows for children to have extended periods of play and to access a range of interesting experiences. Practitioners make effective use of the community to provide children with real-life opportunities. This helps children develop skills for life and become familiar with landmarks and places in their local community. Children learn about the work of local businesses and are aware of how to be safe when visiting the beach or the local woods.
- Overall, practitioners do not yet have a deep enough understanding of CfE. This is hampering practitioners' ability to provide a broad, coherent curriculum that offers, depth, challenge and progression for children. While practitioners offer experiences to promote literacy and numeracy, they need to plan these at the right level for children's differing stages of development. Children require increased opportunities to develop, practise and consolidate these skills through play.
- Senior leaders and practitioners support children well as they begin their nursery experience. Their support for children and families is flexible and adaptive. They gather important information about children's prior experiences. Practitioners now need to use this information more effectively to build on children's prior learning. As children move on to P1, helpful activities are arranged for children and families to visit the receiving school. Practitioners share key information with schools to support continuity and transition for children.

2.7 Partnerships: Impact on children and families – parental engagement

- In the past year, the manager has encouraged parents to become more involved in the life of the nursery. Practitioners welcome parents into the nursery to spend time with their child. Parents welcome these opportunities. Since the manager commenced her post, the quality and frequency of communication with parents has improved greatly. Parents feel more involved. Moving forward, the new manager and practitioners could seek ways to enable parents to come into the nursery on a daily basis, to drop off and pick up their child.
- Parents appreciate the regular information shared with them about their children's experiences. This is through online platforms. Parents can meet with their child's key worker or the manager to share information, access support and to hear about their child's learning. As assessment and planning for children's learning improves, practitioners should involve parents more fully when identifying their children's next steps in learning.

2.1 Safeguarding

- The setting submitted self-evaluation information related to child protection and safeguarding. Inspectors discussed this information with relevant staff and, where appropriate, children. In addition, inspectors examined a sample of safeguarding documentation. Areas for development have been agreed with the setting and the education authority.

3.1 Ensuring wellbeing, equality and inclusion

weak

This indicator reflects on the setting's approach to children's wellbeing which underpins their ability to achieve success. It highlights the need for policies and practices to be well grounded in current legislation and a shared understanding of the value of each individual. A clear focus on wellbeing entitlements and protected characteristics supports all children to be the best they can be and celebrates their successes and achievements. The themes are:

- wellbeing
- fulfilment of statutory duties
- inclusion and equality

- Senior leaders and practitioners have developed positive relationships with children and families. As a result, the ethos of the nursery is inclusive, supportive, and welcoming. Practitioners offer children gentle reassurance if they are unsure or upset. This supports children well to develop resilience, gain confidence and independence.
- Most children cooperate with each other well during play and are developing friendships. Practitioners support children's physical wellbeing through meaningful real-life experiences, such as outings to the beach and woodland. This is helping children to learn about risk and how to keep safe. Children could have greater responsibility within the nursery through leadership roles, giving them a greater sense of ownership and achievement.
- Practitioners support children's emotional and physical wellbeing in a variety of ways. Children talk confidently about the range of emotions they experience and take part in mindfulness sessions. They access the outdoors daily and have the opportunity to develop physical skills during tennis lessons, fitness and yoga sessions. Children's snack and lunchtimes are social occasions. Most practitioners sit with children and engage in conversation. This is helping children to develop good manners and social skills. Children are independent as they help to set the table, serve themselves and clear away.
- All children have a personal plan in place. However, current practice within the nursery means that statutory duties in relation to safeguarding are not always being met. This is an important weakness. The owner and manager must work with the local authority and support agencies to improve internal processes. This should include professional learning to ensure the provider, manager and all practitioners have a sound understanding about their responsibilities in fulfilling statutory duties. The nursery manager must have the necessary documentation and supports in place to ensure the right level of care and support for all children.
- Senior leaders and practitioners value children as individuals. They promote inclusion and equalities through their interactions and experiences. Practitioners treat children and families in a respectful manner. The manager and practitioners are beginning to support children to become more aware of their diverse community. Building on this, they should ensure that resources within the nursery reflect the world in which children live.

3.2 Securing children's progress

satisfactory

This indicator relates to the development and learning of babies, toddlers and young children. It requires clear understanding of early learning and development and pedagogy. It reflects the integrated way young children learn and the importance of experiences and development happening on an individual basis within a supportive, nurturing and stimulating environment. High quality early learning and childcare contributes significantly to enhancing children's progress and achievement as they grow and learn. It can benefit all children by closing the attainment gap and ensuring equity for all. It is about the holistic nature of development and learning ensuring these foundations are secure in order to achieve future attainment success. The themes are:

- progress in communication, early language, mathematics, and health and wellbeing
- children's progress over time
- overall quality of children's achievement
- ensuring equity for all children

Children under three

- Children settle well into nursery and are learning to become independent. They explore sensory experiences enthusiastically. Outdoors, they develop their physical skills as they navigate the different areas to develop balance and coordination. Children particularly enjoy exploring objects they can roll, throw and put into containers. They are developing their early communication and language skills well through singing familiar songs. All children would benefit from being able to explore an increased range of natural and open-ended resources.

Children aged over three.

- Children come to nursery with a range of prior experiences skills and knowledge. As a result of their nursery experience, children could be making better progress over time. Practitioners need to be able to demonstrate the value that nursery experiences are adding to children's learning and development. Overall, children are making satisfactory progress.
- In early communication and language, the majority of children make satisfactory progress. They engage in conversation with adults and their peers during play. They listen well during stories, and a few can retell familiar stories. All children are learning sign language, and the majority are developing their skills well. A few children are showing an interest in letters and can identify the letters in their names and some familiar words. It is important for practitioners to use the correct letter sounds to support children's early reading skills more effectively. Almost all children need increased opportunities to explore mark-making and different texts, through a wider range of play and real-life experiences.
- In early numeracy and mathematics, the majority of children are developing their counting skills through routines and play experiences. A few children use mathematical language when making comparisons of length and height. The majority of children are not yet developing a wide enough range of skills or understanding in early numeracy and mathematics. They need increased experiences to explore money, time, information handling, shape and pattern.
- In health and wellbeing, the majority of children are making good progress. They are aware of a range of emotions and can share how they feel and why. They talk confidently about healthy foods during snack and mealtimes. Most children develop gross motor skills well during outdoor play. They learn how to move their bodies through yoga and exercises. Children's fine motor skills are progressing well through a range of opportunities. They are beginning to identify common risks in their outdoor area.

- Information within floorbooks, learning journals and individual trackers does not yet show accurately the progress children are making over time as a result of their nursery experience. Practitioners should deepen their understanding of how to use progression pathways and trackers to identify more clearly the progress children make, over their time in nursery.
- Practitioners praise and encourage children in a meaningful way. They celebrate children's artwork through displays and recognise their achievements on the 'achievement tree'. Children are proud to display their achievements, such as developing skills in balance, sharing, and keeping the environment tidy. Practitioners encourage parents to share their children's achievements from home. They should now seek ways to build on children's achievements from home, through better planned nursery experiences.
- The manager and practitioners know children and families well. When required, they offer support and reassurance to families in a discreet way. Parents are very appreciative of the support offered.
- Senior leaders and practitioners are not yet using the range of information they gather on children to ascertain where there may be potential gaps in their learning. They need to understand and use data more effectively to identify where children require support or challenge, in order to make better progress.

1.1 Nurturing care and support

We observed children that were happy, confident, and having fun. They experienced warm, nurturing, and responsive care from staff which helped them to feel welcomed and loved in the setting. We observed praise, cuddles and reassurance from staff which meant attachments and relationships were strong resulting in children feeling safe, and secure in the service.

We found children enjoyed mealtimes that were relaxed, unhurried and sociable. During snack and lunch times children were encouraged to be independent and self-serve their drinks and food choices. Children enjoyed engaging in conversations with each other and staff. Staff recognised this routine as an opportunity to check in with children and reflect on their morning at nursery.

Children's personal plans contained relevant core information about individual health, welfare, and safety needs. The service communicated effectively with parents through daily conversations at drop off and collection times, parents' meetings and the services online journal. We found from sampling the information held it was not always clear to identify or track children's next steps or identify their interests. We would encourage the service to streamline information to make it easier to identify next steps, and how staff are supporting children's individual needs.

Children's health and wellbeing was supported by a clear administration of medication policy and procedures. The service was storing medication appropriately in line with best practice guidance 'Management of medication in daycare and childminding settings.' We sampled the nursery's medication consent forms and found these require to be updated in line with current good practice guidance. We have asked management to monitor the medication forms to ensure all information requested is recorded and consent forms are held with children's medication.

Accidents and incidents were being recorded and shared with parents, we suggested streamlining the current system in place and implementing a measles chart as part of the monthly audit. This would support staff and management to clearly identify any areas of risk, and any changes required to support a safe environment for children.

Care Inspectorate evaluation: good

1.3 Play and learning

Children were visibly happy, content and actively accessing all experiences on offer on the days of inspection. Children benefited from a variety of play-based learning opportunities within the nursery. For example, children enjoyed a walk out to the forest where they balanced on logs, measured trees, splashed and jumped in the streams and engaged positively with people in their community. Outdoors at the nursery children were making Christmas dinner in the mud kitchen area while singing along to Christmas songs. While inside children were getting creative at the art area and enjoyed painting and playing with the gloop. We observed a balance of adult directed and freely chosen activities which supported children to develop their imagination, creativity and risky play. As a result, we found that some children were developing early-level skills and had opportunities to lead their own play and learning through the experiences created by staff.

However, we found not all experiences sparked curiosity or developed children's, progression or depth in play and learning. Experiences on offer varied in quality throughout the inspection and we found there were missed opportunities to engage and support children. The management team

should continue to monitor the quality of experiences on offer. This will help to ensure all children receive high quality play and learning every day.

Individual Learning Journals were being used to capture children's experiences and some of their achievements, thoughts and ideas. However, when sampling the planning processes that were in place, along with children's individual learning journals, we found it was difficult to identify a clear progression pathway and next steps in children's play and learning.

We discussed with management and staff how there needed to be a more holistic approach to tracking children's progress, with planning being more individualised and responsive, based on children's interests and reflecting their choices. To support and enable children to learn through more purposeful, high quality play experiences, strands of learning should be developed from and linked to their ideas and interests. Staff should continue to build as a team on their experience and expertise to fully meet children's needs through high quality observations, this includes extending children's thinking and widening their skills to support them in developing their interests and leading on their play and learning. (See area for Improvement 1)

Care Inspectorate evaluation: adequate

2.2 Children experience high quality facilities

Children experienced an environment that was welcoming, warm and had a nurturing ethos. The playrooms were designed to be inviting, calming, and engaging for children. In most rooms, there was space for children to rest and relax, with soft furnishings and areas where they could play alone or in small groups with their peers. We observed children that were, confident, happy and freely accessing all areas to play and learn.

Children had access to a variety of natural, opened ended materials which was supporting children's choice and developing their creativity and imagination. Some staff were responsive to children's requests and helped extend their play by adding new resources for example developing art areas in response to the needs of the children. As a result, most children were settled and engaged well with the experiences on offer while playing alongside their peers.

Most children could free flow between the indoor playroom and enclosed outdoor garden. This gave them the opportunity to choose where they wanted to play and staff provided appropriate resources and materials to support children's learning, for example crates for climbing on, opportunities to be creative in the mud kitchen and sand area. Children were encouraged to have regular access to outdoors, giving them opportunities to play, run and take part in risky play.

Children and staff were confident in effective hand washing procedures. We have reminded the service that the children's toilet door should be closed at all times. Staff should also be mindful of washing staff and children's hands after wiping runny noses. This is to support the service in reducing the spread of infection.

Monitoring and supervision had been established in the nursery to ensure children were always accounted for at all times. Busier times of the day such as parent drop off and pick up times were planned to ensure children remained safe and secure in the environment. There was a secure entry system in place which was monitored by staff. We have asked management to review the locks on the gates outdoors this will also support children's safety when attending the nursery.

Care Inspectorate evaluation: good

3.1 Quality assurance and improvement are led well

We found the manager was supporting the service very well, but we recognise the challenges she had faced over the past year. Throughout the inspection the team responded well, taking on advice and encouragement when suggestions were made. Management and staff were committed to the development of the service, working together to establish a shared vision in delivering the best outcomes for children and families.

Developing partnerships with parents had been a focus for the service. The team are encouraging parents to be an active part in their child's care, play and learning through stay and play sessions, parents' meetings and actively seeking feedback on how the service can improve. We would now ask the service to review their current drop off and collection routine with a focus on encouraging parents back into the service. This will support relationships, transitions and develop communication links between nursery and home.

The service has some plans in place to support improvement. Where there is evidence of some monitoring and evaluation being carried out, we were not seeing the impact of actions that were identified. Quality assurance, including monitoring and self-evaluation now needs to be firmly embedded into the process of evaluating and improving the nursery. The manager would benefit from accessing the Care Inspectorate HUB to use 'The Model for Improvement' which provides a framework for developing, testing, and implementing changes. This would help the management team to monitor change and the impact to support more reflective practice and improved outcomes for children. (See area for improvement 2).

During inspection we were advised the current manager will be leaving. To ensure the service continues to grow, develop and deliver best outcomes we would ask that the provider has an active supportive role during these changes and leadership is supported and effectively managed to sustain and maximise the best outcomes for children, families and staff. (See area for improvement 3)

We found nearly all staff had completed relevant child protection training and were confident in how to report any concerns. We had further discussions with the provider of the service and the local authority after we sampled some safeguarding documents and identified some areas for development that need to be addressed. We have agreed the provider and local authority will follow this up as a priority.

Care Inspectorate evaluation: adequate

4.3 Staff deployment

Children were cared for by a team that were caring, nurturing and compassionate. Staff were enthusiastic about the service and their roles and were respectful to each other through their interactions. This created a positive environment that allowed the children to feel safe and secure, with adults who cared for them.

The setting was appropriately staffed to meet the needs of children. We found the staff communicated well with each other throughout the inspection and there was a good mix of skills, knowledge and understanding within the staff team. They worked well together, communicating clearly when their attention was needed with children, or they were moving about the setting and prior to any transitions. This contributed to effective supervision throughout the day resulting in children being confident and comfortable about routines and transitions.

We found staff were deployed effectively throughout the indoor playrooms and enclosed outdoor garden which supported good levels of interactions and promoted the wellbeing and safety of children. Staff shared roles and responsibilities well through being in an area over a two-week rotation and ensuring they positioned themselves to support the needs of the children. This was allowing staff to support children's individual needs, develop areas of play and learning while engaging with children in different parts of the nursery for example, snack area, outdoors and creative area. As a result, children were being cared for in an environment and with staff who were prioritising children's needs, care, play and learning.

Staff had attended a variety of training to support their learning, development, and practice. We could see the impact of training emerging in the environment, interactions and play experiences offered to children. For example, staff have recently begun developing communication methods with the children using Makaton and have plans to implement the PATHs programme (Promoting alternative thinking strategies) which supports children with their emotions and communication. As a result, children were recognising and managing their emotions while developing skills in communication. We would encourage the team to continue to reflect on their practice and continuous professional development to support positive outcomes for children and their families.

Care Inspectorate evaluation: good

During the previous Care Inspectorate inspection, the setting had no requirements and no areas for improvement. As a result of this inspection, there are no requirements and three areas for improvement.

Areas for improvement

Area for Improvement 1

To support children to achieve their full potential the manager and staff should review the current planning cycle to include high quality observations and next steps, with a focus on children's developmental stages. This will ensure that children are supported to lead their own play and learning that is tailored to their individual abilities and needs. This should include, but not be limited to, high quality observations, meaningful next steps and evidence of progression in learning.

This is to ensure that care and support is consistent with the Health and Social Care Standards (HSCS) which state: '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 to my age and stage, which stimulate my natural curiosity, learning and creativity' (HSCS 2.27) and 'My care and support meets my needs and is right for me' (HSCS 1.19).

Area for improvement 2

To improve better outcomes for children. Management should develop and implement robust quality assurance systems with a focus on, monitoring children's personal plans, children's experiences, monitoring of staff practice and evaluating and improving the nursery.

This is to ensure that management and leadership is consistent with the Health and Social Care Standards that state; 'I benefit from a culture of continuous improvement, with the organisation having robust and transparent quality assurance processes' (HSCS 4.19).

Area for improvement 3

To ensure the service continues to grow, develop and deliver best outcomes. The provider should have an active supportive role in supporting and effectively managing the new leadership team to sustain and maximise the best outcomes for children, families and staff.

This is to ensure that management and leadership is consistent with the Health and Social Care Standards which state: 'I use a service and organisation that are well led and managed' (HSCS 4.23) and 'I experience high quality care and support because people have the necessary information and resources' (HSCS 4.27)

Explanation of terms of quantity

The following standard Education Scotland terms of quantity are used in this report:

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| All | 100% |
| Almost all | 91%-99% |
| Most | 75%-90% |
| Majority | 50%-74% |
| Minority/less than half | 15%-49% |
| A few | less than 15% |

Other quantitative terms used in this report are to be understood as in common English usage.