

# Earthtime's Forest School Nursery Day Care of Children

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**Type of inspection:**  
Unannounced

**Completed on:**  
20 February 2025

**Service provided by:**  
Earthtime for All Ltd

**Service provider number:**  
SP2018013071

**Service no:**  
CS2018364459

## About the service

Earthtime's Forest School Nursery is registered to provide a fully outdoor care service to a maximum of 50 children at any one time. Of those no more than 10 may be aged two to under three years, no more than 32 may be aged three years to those not attending primary school, and no more than 15 may be of primary school age.

The service is located near a rural village in Moray. Children spend their time in the outdoor space at the nursery base and within woodland areas nearby.

## About the inspection

This was an unannounced inspection which took place on 19-20 February 2025 between 09:30 and 17:30. The inspection was carried out by one inspector 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 the staff and manager at the service
- Spoke with children during their play
- Gathered feedback about the service from families
- Observed practice and children's experiences
- Reviewed documents.

## Key messages

- Children were well cared for by nurturing and supportive staff, and were happy and confident as a result.
- Staff knew children very well and enabled high quality learning experiences that followed their interests.
- Children benefitted from a rich outdoor environment which provided them with opportunities for creativity, exploration and development of skills.
- The manager led the service well, empowering the whole staff team to develop the service and creating opportunities for families to be involved.
- The service made very good connections with the local and wider community.

## 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?	5 - Very Good
How good is our setting?	5 - Very Good
How good is our leadership?	5 - Very Good
How good is our staff team?	5 - Very Good

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

## How good is our care, play and learning?

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.

### 1.1 Nurturing care and support

Children were nurtured and supported throughout their daily experience by kind, caring staff. This helped to support their overall wellbeing. Staff used gentle voices and warm tones to support children at all times. They knew each child very well and their practice reflected families' preferences and wishes. This provided continuity of care which helped to promote children's independence and confidence. Parents strongly agreed that staff knew their children well. One parent said, "I feel like all staff have read the information I filled in before my son joined, as all staff have made specific comments that reflect the information in there."

When personal care was required, staff supported this in ways that offered privacy and dignity. They were discrete when offering reminders to go to the toilet and wash hands and ensured that nappy changing tents were warm and comfortable. This helped to build children's confidence and security.

Mealtimes were sociable and relaxed, and children benefited from improvements that had been made since the last inspection. They were supported to wash their hands before collecting their meals and independently served themselves additional vegetables. Staff sat with the children and had their lunch at the same time, which helped to model healthy habits and enabled staff to supervise children, to minimise the risk of choking. Children had opportunities to develop independence skills through involvement in food preparation. For example, "Tasty Tuesdays" had been introduced which enabled children to be involved in making soup and bread. This helped children to develop their skills and link their knowledge of the wider world. Children attending after-school sessions were offered snacks as they took part in an activities afternoon in the village hall. This was well organised and flexible, with children being encouraged to serve themselves. Fresh water was available throughout the day and children were regularly encouraged to remain hydrated.

Information on allergies and preferences had been shared with staff, and they used this effectively to keep children safe. Children's medical needs were supported well by the safe storage and administration of medication.

There were suitable arrangements in place for children who needed to sleep or have quiet time. Staff knew children well and used their cues to support children to use quiet spaces such as the hammock or the yurt.

Children's wellbeing benefited from the effective use of personal planning. Good partnership working with other professionals supported staff to identify and implement appropriate strategies and next steps for individual children based on their needs. Staff worked well together to ensure consistency of approaches, and the manager had a secure overview of those children who needed additional support. Regular reviews of information gathered from families were in place. We suggested that regularly reviewing children's views on their preferences, interests, likes and dislikes would help to inform planning for individual children and the service agreed to take this forward. Some of the children we spoke to in the after-school session were keen to take on this responsibility and we shared that with the service for their consideration.

Effective procedures were in place to safeguard children. Staff had recently attended child protection training and were confident in how to raise concerns in line with service procedures.

### 1.3 Play and learning

Children were highly engaged and had fun as they played. They were empowered to fully lead their play through the skilled interactions of staff, who supported with timely interactions or let play develop. Staff responded to children's cues and took opportunities to build on their interests through discussions, questions or wondering aloud. This enabled children to develop their skills and learn about the world around them. Parents strongly agreed that their children were supported to follow their interests. One parent told us, "My child has amazing play experiences - a really good mix of physical, climbing and messy play and lots of role play and pretending. They do lots of art and drawing but also lots of fine motor skills such as hammering, threading, using tools such as saws." Another parent told us that they appreciated the opportunities their child had to experience, "Tinkering with real tools, mark making with natural materials charcoal, dye from berries, making potions, inventing their own games." We agreed that the wide variety of spaces and resources on offer provided high quality play, learning and development experiences.

Staff planned together to provide a balance of spontaneous and planned, schematic play opportunities which helped to promote choice, independence and imagination. Planning approaches were based on children's interests and life experiences, and as a result children were happy and confident. A member of staff told us, "Children's voice is the first step of planning as we carry out child-led learning. We use observation to develop ideas for planning which follow and develop upon things that the children are interested in, at the time as well as things that are inspired by the environment around them."

Staff effectively considered how to incorporate language, literacy and numeracy into experiences. They skilfully supported children to extending their vocabulary through daily conversations and provided opportunities for mark making throughout the setting. They had recently attended training on numeracy and were enthusiastic about applying their learning to further support numeracy in the nursery. Parents strongly agreed that their child was making good progress in their development and learning. One parent said, "My child is gaining a huge appreciation for being outdoors. His imaginative play has grown leaps and bounds. I have also seen huge growth in his verbal skills."

Children's opportunities for play and learning were enhanced through meaningful connections to their own community. For example, the nursery had developed a strong partnership with the local secondary school. Senior students ran a weekly activity club in the local village hall, for those children attending after-school sessions. The club offered opportunities to play team games, board games and craft activities, all of which were popular with the children. Groups of students had built items to support the nursery, and children attending the nursery had an input into the design of these items. For example, benches for the outdoor gather and mealtimes areas were made from recycled pallets. Nursery children proudly told us that they had decorated them and enjoyed using them. The children had built positive bonds with the students, and this was evident in their interactions. As such, this community partnership enhanced children's play and learning opportunities.

The service had developed the use of quality observations and assessments to identify, share and celebrate children's progress, development and achievements. Staff had worked closely together to refine their approach to recording observations for each child. They had also increased opportunities for parents and carers to discuss their child's progress and contribute to their learning journals. As a result, children were supported to progress at the right pace for them. Parents told us that they valued opportunities to view and discuss their child's learning. One parent said, "We often have weeks where our child is focus child and we get a focus sheet on her time at nursery which we can discuss with her key workers. The staff are happy to

chat about my child at any time too." We agreed that this approach enabled the service to plan and respond to children's individual needs.

## How good is our setting?

### 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.

A variety of large, outdoor spaces available to the children provided very good opportunities to enjoy active play. The spaces provided wide-ranging opportunities to develop their problem solving, investigation and enquiry skills. Children were consulted on how play spaces could be used, ensuring that their interests were at the centre of decisions. For example, where a natural dip in the landscape caused water to pond, the children had decided to bring tools and containers to extend their play there. This gave children a sense of ownership.

The outdoors environment offered resources and spaces appropriate for children's stages of development and learning. Children explored nature and wildlife, and played with a wide variety of natural, open-ended resources. There was a mix of surfaces and textures to provide sensory opportunities and to enable children to run and climb or sit and read. Children had opportunities to rest and relax in safe, cosy areas including hammocks in the woodland area, and soft seating within the yurt. The range of rich, stimulating areas and resources helped to support children's learning. Staffing levels supported this further. For example, when a child referred to a previous learning experience, staff were able to support their interest by taking them back to that space or locating the resources that had been used.

Staff worked well together to ensure that children were always accounted for and kept safe. The setting was well maintained, and staff were skilled in identifying and removing risks to children. They were also confident to carry out minor repairs, which enabled resources to remain available to children. Children were involved in assessing the benefits and risks of their play. This encouraged and supported them to stay safe whilst taking part in risky play and physical challenge.

Good infection prevention and control measures supported children's health and wellbeing. Portable handwashing units were available at each play area and staff effectively supervised and supported children to wash their hands at appropriate times. A system for drying hands using fabric handtowels was working efficiently and was consistent with the environmentally sound approach taken by the service. This minimised the potential for the 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.

Children's care and support benefited from a leadership and staff team who embraced a positive approach to continuous improvement. There was a shared responsibility to supporting improvement within the service. To reflect this the service had reviewed their aims and values and sought the views of families and children. As a result, the staff team understood what was important to children and families and used this knowledge to inform their practice. Parents told us they felt involved in many aspects of the nursery. For example, one parent said, "There are lots of opportunities to take part in the nursery community - fundraising activities, fun days etc." We encouraged the service manager to continue to develop meaningful ways to involve families, to further enhance outcomes for children.

Effective self-evaluation processes supported the ongoing development of the service. Staff contributed effectively to improvements within the nursery, and they told us that they felt empowered to drive forward changes within the service. For example, they had worked together to make improvements to mealtimes and had carried out observations of each other's practice. This helped to ensure that changes were consistent and well-paced. One member of staff shared with us, "The introduction of learning journals has opened up the chance to look back on children's work and has strengthened bonds and communication. The [service improvement plan] floor book has provided a chance to document, describe, develop and discuss how our service works." We agreed that these developments were contributing positively to outcomes for children and families.

Quality assurance processes had been developed and were having a positive impact on improving outcomes for children. A quality assurance calendar was in place which helped the service to ensure consistency in care and support. For example, the service had begun to review processes and policies on a rotating basis. Procedures for aspects of safe practice including the administration of medicine, and keeping children's information secure, had been reviewed, updated and shared with parents. The staff team had been fully involved in actioning the service improvement plan and developing the plan for the forthcoming year. Targets within the plan were realistic and appropriate and had the potential to enhance outcomes further.

### How good is our staff team?

**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.

Children were supported by a happy and dedicated staff team who were warm, welcoming and nurturing. Staff were consistently calm, respectful and caring, and this had a positive impact on how the children interacted with staff and with each other. As a result, children felt secure, loved and valued by the people who cared for them. Parents agreed that the staff team were friendly and approachable. One parent said, "Staff are always happy to chat formally and informally. We always feel welcome when we arrive even if we are early for pick up."

The service was well staffed, which meant that children were supervised wherever they chose to play. This meant that they were truly empowered to lead their own play and learning. Individualised support was consistent for those children who needed it, so that all children were supported to reach their potential. Staff communicated well and were proactive and flexible in their roles. They supervised children effectively at busier times of the day such as mealtimes, drop off and pick up times. Their breaks were well planned to enable them to have time off the floor, without children's experiences being affected. This meant that there was continuity of care across the day and children's experiences were positive and safe.

Children benefited from a staff team who demonstrated a very good understanding of how children develop and learn. They were committed to maintaining good practice and ensuring high quality experiences for the children. As such, they made good use of professional development opportunities and utilised time away from the children effectively for planning and reviewing practice. They spent quality time building individual and team knowledge and effectiveness. As a team, they were encouraged by senior leaders to review their own practice, identify strengths and plan their next steps. Staff were effectively deployed across the setting to take account of their knowledge and skills. This extended to staff team members having opportunities to lead on developments and practice.

The leadership team had in place clear processes for recruiting, mentoring and supporting staff. Staff strongly agreed that they were well supported by leaders and by each other. Personalised support was available for staff in terms of skills and wellbeing, with regular formal and informal supervision sessions taking place. Staff told us that this contributed to high morale within the team. This in turn helped to ensure that staff were confident in meeting the needs of individual children.

## 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 positive outcomes and continuous improvement for children and families, the provider should ensure that approaches to quality assurance are developed. This should include, but is not limited to, monitoring all aspects of practice, and seeking the views of parents and carers to support improvement.

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 area for improvement was made on 5 October 2023.**

#### Action taken since then

The manager had developed robust quality assurance processes including monitoring of practice, spaces and experiences. A calendar was in place to support regular review of procedures and policies. This helped to promote consistency of care and high quality play and learning experiences.

The staff team had worked very well together to develop their approach to self-evaluation, and this had led to a number of positive developments which were benefitting children. For example, the mealtime experience had improved and observations in learning journals were helping staff, children and families to review progress.

The team had set ambitious but achievable targets in their improvement plan and this had enabled them to work closely together to reach shared aims. The team had identified further improvements for the forthcoming year, for example identifying next steps in learning and sharing these with families. As such the service demonstrated capacity to continue to use the self evaluation cycle to make further improvements.

**This area for improvement has been met.**

#### Previous area for improvement 2

To ensure positive outcomes for children, management should ensure that staff are deployed in a way that meets children and families' needs across the day. This should include, but is not limited to, during mealtimes and collection time.



This is to ensure that care and support is consistent with the Health and Social Care Standards (HSCS) which state that:

'My needs are met by the right number of people' (HSCS 3.15); and

'My care and support is consistent and stable because people work well together' (HSCS 3.19).

**This area for improvement was made on 5 October 2023.**

#### Action taken since then

The leadership team had reviewed staff deployment throughout the setting to allow for higher levels of supervision and flexibility throughout the session. This was benefitting children in a number of ways. For example, mealtimes were more sociable, relaxed and more closely supervised, and were safe and enjoyable as a result. Staff were on hand to support individual children with their interests to a greater extent, which meant that their learning and development was truly child-led. As a result, children were happy and confident, and staff were able to identify their progress and development and share their successes and achievements with families.

**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](http://www.careinspectorate.com).

## Detailed evaluations

How good is our care, play and learning?	5 - Very Good
1.1 Nurturing care and support	5 - Very Good
1.3 Play and learning	5 - Very Good
How good is our setting?	5 - Very Good
2.2 Children experience high quality facilities	5 - Very 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?	5 - Very Good
4.3 Staff deployment	5 - Very Good

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