

Hawkhill Forest Kindergarten Day Care of Children

Craigmillar Castle Park
Hawkhill Woods
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Type of inspection:
Unannounced

Completed on:
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Service provided by:
City of Edinburgh Council

Service provider number:
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Service no:
CS2023000100

About the service

Hawkhill Forest Kindergarten is registered to provide a fully outdoor care service to a maximum of 20 children aged between three years and primary school entry at any one time.

The manager of the service is also the manager of Bonaly Forest Kindergarten and Newbattle Forest Kindergarten.

The service was provided by City of Edinburgh Council and located in Hawkhill Woods. This location can be accessed by foot or by car. There is a carpark close to the cabins. The location of the base on the site may vary from time to time so that the woodland area may recover from the daily use. The position of the cabins will remain the same.

About the inspection

This was an unannounced inspection which took place on 13 May 2025 between 8:45 and 15:45, and on 15 May 2025 between 12:00 and 13:00. One inspector carried out the inspection.

To prepare for the inspection we reviewed information about this service. This included registration information, information submitted by the service and intelligence gathered since registration.

In making our evaluations of the service we:

- spoke with twelve children using the service
- considered feedback from six families through an online questionnaire
- considered feedback from six staff through an online questionnaire
- observed practice and daily life
- reviewed documents relating to the care of children and the management of the service.

As part of this inspection, we undertook a focus area. We have gathered specific information to help us understand more about how service supports children's safety, wellbeing and engagement in their play and learning. This included reviewing the following aspects:

- staff deployment
- safety of the physical environment, indoors and outdoors
- the quality of personal plans and how well children's needs are being met
- children's engagement with the experiences provided in their setting

Key messages

- Children's wellbeing and experiences were supported by staff who provided warm, caring and nurturing approaches.
- Children benefitted from a welcoming outdoor forest environment where they had regular contact with nature and rich learning experiences and as a result, children were confident, happy and motivated to learn.
- Reviews for personal plans could be more clearly recorded to ensure they reflect reviews with families at least every six months.
- The service used positive connections within the community to resolve issues and increase the safety of the children on the site.
- There is a developing culture of continuous improvement with strong supportive leadership.
- Quality assurance processes had been developed and largely had positive impacts on improving outcomes for children.
- Children were at the heart of the happy, nurturing and enabling outdoor environment.
- Effective staff deployment across the service meant that children's individual needs were being met by the right number of staff throughout the day.

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?	4 - 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's wellbeing and experiences were supported by staff who provided warm, caring and nurturing approaches. Through their warm and caring interactions, staff not only fostered a sense of security and confidence but also actively promoted the building of meaningful relationships among the children. One parent told us, "The staff are very nurturing and skilled". Staff clearly knew children in their care well and the support needed to help them engage in their play and settle into the forest environment. Staff read their cues, providing support for wellbeing when needed, as a result, children felt safe and secure in the forest kindergarten.

Children experienced outdoor mealtimes that were unhurried and relaxed. Children were given choice on when to come for their meal and sat at tables under a tarpaulin shelter in the forest. Staff identified that children could be hungrier when outdoors all day and there were opportunities for extra food at mealtimes and snacks. Meals were sent from a nearby school and a warm vegetarian meal was provided. While a cool box was used for items like milk during snack times, we encouraged staff to consistently utilise cool packs and check milk storage temperatures.

Staff sat with children to support social interactions, provide help when needed and to maintain safety. For example, ensuring dietary needs were met. One parent told us, "My son can be fussy, but this is more his personal taste rather than what's on offer!! There is always something he will eat and he's even trying new foods". Another parent commented, "I don't really know what my child eats throughout the day, as there is little communication in that regard. However, I feel this is a minor fault as I much prefer my child to have the attention of the teachers, rather than have them engaged in constantly updating details online". Children were supported to be independent and learn new skills by learning to use cutlery and self-serve their own foods and drinks with staff support. Moving forward, the service could further consider the ways of communicating to families the meals and snacks on offer each day in the forest.

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 toileting and nappy changing tents were comfortable. This helped to build children's confidence and security.

We sampled personal plans and saw that these were created with parents to capture children's needs, interests, and preferences using the wellbeing indicators. Personal plans gave examples of partnership working with families to promote children's needs and interests. Four families strongly agreed they felt fully involved in developing their child's plan. Personal plan information was mostly used effectively to support children's overall health and wellbeing. We discussed that staff could further consider the detail of entries in the wellbeing diary to ensure it is informative and gives clear actions or next steps for support strategies. We also discussed the need to clearly record the reviews carried out on personal plans with families. This would then reflect their reviews carried out at least every six months, or sooner if there is a change in a child's circumstances or wellbeing as per legislation. Paperwork in place indicated that this would be followed going forward. The service had the capacity to take this forward.

Children were kept safe as medication was stored securely and records were up to date. Although staff recorded when they had provided medication, this was not acknowledged by the parent on the form. As per Care Inspectorate guidance – Management of medication in daycare of children and childminding services the service should ensure they record on the child's administered medication record who the information was shared with, and it should be signed by the person collecting the child.

Children were able to rest and have quiet times if they wished. Children were given opportunities to sleep or rest within the hammock or the cosy story area of the forest. A parent told us, "They have cosy corners and sleeping bags. I feel this is better than an indoor nursery as there are more spaces to rest". As a result, children's wellbeing needs were being met.

1.3 Play and Learning

Children were confident in the outdoor forest environment and had fun through a variety of play, learning and development opportunities which promoted their choice, creativity, wellbeing and imagination. Experiences included, arts/crafts, swinging and climbing, games, storytelling, loose parts, imaginative play, clay, paper making and adventures in the wider grounds. Feedback from families about the service included, "The opportunities are so valuable – fires, cooking on the fire, adventures, outdoor art, learning about nature" and "They are outdoors all day in the forest, they go on forest adventures, play in the mud, roll down hills, climb trees (with supervision) and he even introduced me to wild garlic and tells me some of the names of various wildlife and trees etc". We agreed that the wide variety of spaces and resources on offer provided high quality play, learning and development experiences.

Staff viewed daily routines as learning opportunities. Staff actively involved children in tasks such as setting up the forest site in the morning and clearing away at the end of the session. Children were always given a choice throughout the day and were able to choose to transition into snacks, mealtimes and experiences when they felt ready. This approach fostered responsibility, independence and a sense of belonging for children.

Whilst one family shared that the following would make the service even better; "Having more of a focus on numeracy and literacy for pre-schoolers", we found that children benefited from a rich continuous provision where opportunities for language, literacy and numeracy development were well considered. For example, books and singing, use of number logs where staff described how they use these to count out or measure things in the forest, and opportunities for mark making at arts and crafts areas. Singing and song signifiers also supported inclusion, reminded children of the boundaries and supported children's transitions throughout the day.

Whether families felt kept up to date on their children's progress was variable. Families commented, "Whilst I know the Forest team are delivering fantastic learning, it's sometimes hard to know what they've been learning/doing because it not always communicated, aside from the end of term sway" and another told us, "I feel up to date, I love seeing their updates online. Watching what my child's been up to. And I feel confident I could approach the staff for advice or anything I'd like to work on. I really appreciated our recent easter event where I got a report on my child's progress and how they feel he's doing. I could see they know him very well and he's getting lots of one to one. They describe him just as I would!". Internet was restricted at the site meaning parents were not receiving observations and learning updates as they happened. Moving forward, sharing with families daily the rich numeracy and literacy learning taking place in the natural environment would support families to understand about the quality learning opportunities that children were engaging with in the forest.

Planning approaches were child centred and responsive to children's current interests. This along with staff

engagement helped provide a stimulating environment, and support children's learning and development. The service made good use of floor books and responsive planning to promote learning that was tailored to the seasons, children's interests and developmental needs. We found that children's voice was highly valued. Staff took time to extend conversations with children about their play and used well-timed open-ended questioning to further extend and challenge thinking and learning. For example, on the day of inspection staff had organised experiences based on the children's interests of 'the very hungry caterpillar' story. This was documented in the floor books. The snack and some printing crafts had been carefully planned based on this. Staff engaged in conversations that promoted literacy and retelling of the story. The carefully planned snack represented some of the foods from the story, for children to count out and develop numeracy skills through their daily experiences. There was a slow pedagogy approach which meant time spent supporting children's learning and development was not rushed. Skilled interactions from staff promoted numeracy, language and literacy development during their experiences. We observed rich learning experiences and as a result, children were confident, happy and motivated to learn.

The service had developed 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 quality observations for each child. Parents told us that they valued opportunities to view and discuss their child's learning. We agreed that this approach enabled the service to plan and respond to children's individual needs and as a result, children were supported to progress at the right pace for them.

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.

2.2 children experience high quality facilities.

On site children benefitted from a welcoming outdoor forest environment where children had regular contact with nature and were supported to be responsible citizens committed to sustainability. A variety of large, outdoor spaces available to the children provided very good opportunities to enjoy active play. Children were thriving when playing outdoors in all weathers. Children were consulted on how play spaces could be used, ensuring that their interests were at the centre of decisions. The spaces provided wide-ranging opportunities to develop their problem solving, investigation and enquiry skills. This supported a well-planned natural environment that supported children's wellbeing and development needs. One parent commented, "I just want to reiterate how wonderful Hawkhill Woods is, as a Forest School. The "base camp" is lovely and always improving, and the staff take great pride to make everyone feel welcome. It truly feels like a little family".

The outdoors environment offered resources and spaces appropriate for children's stages of development and learning. Children explored nature and played with a wide variety of natural, open-ended resources. The environment included cosy spaces and sheltered areas where they could enjoy activities in all weathers. Spaces were well defined to support continuity for children each day. For example, specific areas for mealtimes, toilets and storytelling. Children could also enjoy going on adventures to the larger forest with staff for other activities such as games or adventure walks. The team had worked hard on developing the forest environment in their base site, the range of rich, stimulating areas and resources helped to support children's learning and development.

The service effectively utilised community partnerships to enhance site safety and address family concerns. Following reports of issues like motorbikes in the larger forest and fly-tipping on the access route, the

service proactively engaged with groups such as the Community Literacy Trust and Venchie Project. Procedures for using the larger forest were updated, and families were informed of risk mitigation measures. On-site, natural fencing boundaries were implemented, and children engaged in litter-picking to promote environmental learning. Although the service doesn't own the access road, discussions highlighted the need for ongoing efforts to ensure its safety and accessibility for families, including hazard awareness and removal.

Staff worked well together to ensure that children were always accounted for and kept safe. We observed effective use of systems within the forest to ensure staff knew where children were at all times. Staff communicated effectively and regularly counted and recorded the numbers of children playing in each area within the forest. This ensured children were kept safe in the environment at all times.

The setting was well maintained, and staff were skilled in identifying and removing risks 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. The service had developed a range of risk assessments for the site. Risk assessments ensured staff continually assessed the risk on a daily basis taking into account considerations for weather, any rubbish or new risks to the site to help keep children safe. During our review of risk assessments we discovered there was not one in place for the use of hot water bottles. This will be reported on in 3.1 of this report. Whilst these were not used during our visit, we discussed the risk assessment of hot water bottles with the manager. They developed a risk assessment, and this was in place the following day. We asked the service to further consider the need for the use of these when there was other available safer means to keep children warm, such as heaters in the cabin and the use of hand warmers.

Good infection prevention and control measures supported children's health and wellbeing. Portable handwashing units were available at toilets and snack areas and staff effectively supervised and supported children to wash their hands at appropriate times throughout the day. As a result, this minimised the potential for the spread of infection.

How good is our leadership?

4 - Good

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

3.1 Quality assurance and improvement are well led.

Vision and values are shared with families when they start in the service. The service had a clear vision of 'confident individuals who are resilient and self-aware, curious learners who explore and ask questions, caring citizens who respect nature and each other and collaborative contributors who work well with others'. This was evident through the observations made during inspection where play-based learning in the rich outdoor environment was a priority. This created a happy and welcoming ethos which promoted a positive atmosphere for children to have fun, build relationships and learn about nature.

Self-evaluation and quality assurance processes highlighted strengths and areas to improve. Staff contributed effectively to improvements within the nursery. Staff had lead responsibilities within the daily routines of the forest, however, we would encourage staff to take the lead on differing aspects of the improvement journey. This would fully immerse the staff team into the improvement priorities and would encourage staff to take the lead on differing aspects of their improvement journey.

There is a developing culture of continuous improvement with strong supportive leadership. The service had carried out self-evaluation and there was an improvement plan in place. Recent in-service days had been used to evaluate the improvement plans and allow the staff team to have a voice on future developments. Staff shared positive feedback in relation to their capturing and monitoring improvements with consideration for the positive impact this had on their practice and the outcomes for children's learning and experiences. It was evident through our observations of play and learning that the priority of ensuring children have opportunities to share ideas, plan their learning, make choices and act upon them had been well embedded into the service. The service shared that they next want to increase parental engagement in the service and have more involvement from families. Ideas such as developing a parents' forum were being considered. When asked if they were involved in developing the service families told us, "We are asked often if there is anything we would like to improve, I was recently given a form asking this" and another told us, "This is the first time we have been asked to do anything like this, but staff are always open for suggestions". Both staff and families shared that they had any developments listened to and acted upon. As a result, children benefited from a service that was well led.

Quality assurance processes had been developed and mostly had positive impacts on improving outcomes for children. The service had a number of good systems in place for the auditing of processes and procedures and the evaluation of the setting; however, some procedural areas of quality assurance areas were missed. Such as the consistent recording of reviews within personal plans, families signing administered medication forms and a risk assessment that needed developed. Some action was taken to make improvements after the inspection.

A quality assurance calendar supported the service to ensure areas were regularly reviewed however the service should continue to consider their staffing on site to be able to carry out quality assurance checks. For example, the manager was also the named peripatetic manager for other local authority services and the senior early years officer (SEYO) also worked in another outdoor setting so were not always present on site. The service had plans to introduce a SEYO full time to Hawkhill Forest Kindergarten and this would better support the quality assurance systems and developments within the service.

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.

4.3 Staff Deployment

Staff were committed and passionate about getting to know and understand children as individuals. Interactions were warm, kind and caring with children listened to. A rights-based approach and being in nature empowered children building their confidence and self-esteem. Children were at the heart of the happy, nurturing and enabling outdoor environment. Parents were complimentary of the staff team and the way in which they cared for their child. Some families commented, "I have never felt better leaving my children with anyone. I don't want my daughter to leave. I wish there were more schools like this. I am just so impressed with the staff's knowledge and ability to support me and my family. It has also made me go out more with my child in the forest" and "The staff are warm and welcoming. Communication is good. They ensure they know exactly about medication and needs. They pass on any accidents and give me a form. They care about us as a family unit. They have been helpful addressing any concerns with my child's development".

Good use was made of staff's differing skills and knowledge ensuring that children could experience positive

and safe environments throughout the day. The staff routinely engaged in a range of professional learning activities that built on and sustained their practice. This included: outdoor and paediatric first aid, outdoor food hygiene, positive behaviour training, united nations on the convention on the rights of the child training, hannan training, poverty awareness, and Henry training. We found staff were confident in discussing how they had improved their practice as a result of their own professional learning activities. Staff could consider recording the impact of training within their learning logs to reflect on the impact it has in the service.

Staff were given leadership tasks within the day-to-day routines of the forest. Leadership tasks such as personal care, arts and crafts and snack. We highlighted the value of linking staff development opportunities to a variety of leadership roles within the team. This can strengthen the leadership capacity within the team and help ensure staff take forward new initiatives that support children to consistently have experiences and outcomes which are as positive as possible.

Effective staff deployment across the service meant that children's individual needs were being met by the right number of staff throughout all elements of the day. Staff commented that they felt the pending recruitment of a lunch time assistant would support them further during mealtimes. Children who required additional support were well supported by staff to feel respected and included in daily experiences. This was enhanced through effective working relationships with families. Families did not seem to be aware of the daily staffing set up and there were a few comments about not knowing what staff were on site each day. Although the service had a board with staff names and photos displayed, the service could share further information with families of who is on the site each day.

A robust induction process supported newly appointed staff to meet children's needs. The induction programme helped new staff to settle into their role and become part of the staff team. As a result, they were clear about their roles and responsibilities which supported children's experiences.

Complaints

There have been no complaints upheld since the last inspection. Details of any older upheld complaints are published at www.careinspectorate.com.

Detailed evaluations

How good is our care, play and learning?	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?	4 - Good
3.1 Quality assurance and improvement are led well	4 - Good
How good is our staff team?	5 - Very Good
4.3 Staff deployment	5 - Very Good

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