

# Sutherland Stepping Stones Childrens Centre

## Day Care of Children

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**Type of inspection:**  
Unannounced

**Completed on:**  
31 July 2025

**Service provided by:**  
CALA Integrated Services

**Service provider number:**  
SP2010011308

**Service no:**  
CS2010278954

## About the service

Sutherland Stepping Stones Children's Centre is registered to provide a care service to a maximum of 30 children under the age of 16. The service is provided by CALA Integrated Services. The centre provides day care provision and is open Monday to Friday. The service operates throughout the year.

Sutherland Stepping Stones Children's Centre is located in the community centre next to Brora Primary School. The premises consist of a large playroom with kitchen area, two small quiet rooms for younger children, toilets and an office. The playroom opens directly onto the service's outdoor play area.

The service works in partnership with The Highland Council to provide funded early learning and childcare. At the time of the inspection there were nine children in attendance.

## About the inspection

This was an unannounced inspection which took place on 30 July 2025. 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 children using the service
- spoke with staff and management
- observed practice and daily life
- reviewed documents
- received online feedback from one family.

As part of this inspection, we undertook a focus area. We have gathered specific information to help us understand more about how services support 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.

This information will be anonymised and analysed to help inform our future work with services.

## Key messages

- Children were generally happy and settled within the setting.
- Children's individual wellbeing did not consistently benefit from the effective use of personal planning.
- Children experienced positive snack and lunchtime experiences.
- Most children were engaged and motivated in their play.
- Staff interactions did not consistently extend children's learning and widen skills and knowledge through play.
- The indoor space was clean, comfortable and benefitted from natural light and ventilation, creating a welcoming atmosphere for children of all ages.
- The setting had a clear and well-structured approach to quality assurance, supporting continuous improvement.
- Staff deployment did not consistently meet children's needs and the approach to staffing was not always outcome focussed.

## 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?	3 - Adequate
How good is our setting?	4 - Good
How good is our leadership?	4 - Good
How good is our staff team?	3 - Adequate

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

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

## 3 - Adequate

We evaluated this key question as adequate. While the strengths had a positive impact, key areas need to improve.

### Quality Indicator 1.1: Nurturing care and support

Children were generally happy and settled in the setting. Most staff interactions were kind and respectful and children experienced a calm and welcoming environment. Staff offered comfort and reassurance when children were upset, which helped promote a sense of security. However, staff practice was not always consistent. On occasion, a stern tone was used when speaking to children, which did not reflect a fully nurturing approach. This had the potential to impact children's emotional wellbeing.

Staff demonstrated a good understanding of younger children's basic care routines. Immediate needs such as, feeding, toileting and rest were responded to. However, there was potential for continuity and consistency in care to be compromised, as the quality of personal planning was inconsistent. For example, there were no clear strategies of support in place for some children. Where strategies had been identified these were not always followed by all staff, leading to inconsistency in the support children received. **(See Area for improvement 1)**

Safe sleep procedures were consistently followed. Children who required rest were supported in a calm and quiet environment, with staff ensuring that sleep arrangements met current guidance. Appropriate checks were carried out at regular intervals and sleep records were maintained accurately. Staff demonstrated a clear understanding of safe sleep positioning and the importance of monitoring sleeping children to ensure their safety and comfort.

Positive mealtime experiences promoted opportunities for children to develop independence and skills for life. For example, children served their own snack. The snack and lunch time environment promoted a sociable, nurturing experience. The addition of a tablecloth, flowers and real crockery, supported a homely and relaxed atmosphere. At snack and lunchtimes, staff sat with children which provided opportunities to promote close attachments and develop language skills.

Children benefitted from their families being warmly welcomed into the service. Staff greeted parents in the nursery each day, creating a warm and inclusive atmosphere that encouraged strong relationships. They shared updates online and invited parents in for meetings with their child's key worker. This open approach promoted effective partnership working between home and the setting.

### Quality Indicator 1.3: Play and learning

Overall, most children were engaged and motivated in their play and were having fun with other children. They participated in some play experiences which stimulated their learning and creativity. However, on occasions some children were disengaged and would have benefitted from more adult interaction to enable them to feel included in their play.

Play experiences offered children some opportunities to develop and extend literacy and numeracy skills. The indoor playrooms had some materials to support the development of pre-writing skills and staff shared books with children, engaging them with fun interactions, naming items in pictures and modelling and repeating words. Some staff also used songs to reinforce counting and number skills for children. However, opportunities to extend and develop children's literacy and numeracy experiences were not always noticed and acted on. Staff interactions did not consistently extend learning and were often task focussed. This resulted in missed opportunities to extend and widen children's skills and knowledge through play.

Planning for children's play and learning was not consistently informed by high-quality observations or assessments. As a result, children made some progress but the quality of play and learning varied across the setting. To improve outcomes, staff should strengthen their interactions and use planning more effectively to support and extend children's learning. **(See Area for improvement 2)**

### Areas for improvement

1. To support children's wellbeing, the provider should ensure personal planning approaches improve so that they set out clearly how children's care and support needs will be met.

This should include but is not limited to:

- a) ensuring personal plans reflect children's current needs
- b) ensuring strategies of support for individual children are developed and implemented by staff
- c) ensuring all staff are knowledgeable and understand the information within the personal plans and use this to effectively meet each child's needs.

This is to ensure care and support is consistent with the Care Inspectorate document 'Guide for providers on personal planning'.

This is to ensure that care and support is consistent with the Health and Social Care Standards (HSCS) which state that: 'My personal plan (sometimes referred to as a care plan) is right for me because it sets out how my needs will be met, as well as my wishes and choices' (HSCS 1.15).

2.

To ensure children benefit from personalised and enriching experiences, which support their learning and development. The provider should support staff to develop their skills in engaging, responsive interactions that promote curiosity and creativity.

This should include but is not limited to:

- a) ensuring a consistent approach to the quality of staff interactions
- b) strengthening planning processes to ensure they are child-led, flexible and informed by high-quality observations
- c) embedding a consistent approach to observation and assessment that clearly identifies children's progress and informs meaningful next steps.

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

## How good is our setting?

**4 - Good**

We made an evaluation of good, for this key question. As several important strengths taken together clearly outweighed areas for improvement. Whilst some improvements were needed, the strengths identified had a significant positive impact on children's experiences.

### Quality Indicator 2.2: Children experience high quality facilities

The indoor space was clean and comfortable with some natural light and ventilation. This provided a welcoming environment for children of all ages. As part of their ongoing improvement work, the staff team had used best practice guidance to carefully consider the experiences and spaces available within the learning environment. Homely touches and carefully considered furnishings were being introduced to the indoor environment, contributing to a more homely and comfortable environment. The service should continue to develop homely touches to create an environment that captures the feeling of warmth and cosiness.

The layout of spaces enabled children to access resources independently for exploration and play. Consideration had been given to the variety of activities and experiences on offer to stimulate children's sensory exploration. They enjoyed scooping and pouring in the sand tray. This encouraged hand eye coordination and promoted social interaction and communication. Some open ended, natural child-centred resources indoors and outdoors, enabled children to explore their creativity, imagination and problem-solving skills. However, there was scope to develop the use of open-ended resources further.

The building had direct access to an outdoor play area. Children used the outdoor space with confidence and experienced enjoyment, challenge and fun. Areas to climb, run and balance outdoors provided opportunities for children to develop their gross motor skills. There were some opportunities for free flow access between the indoor and outdoor play area. However, this was not consistently offered to children throughout the day.

Good handwashing practices were consistently observed across the setting. Children were supported and encouraged to wash their hands at appropriate times such as, before meals and after using the toilet. Staff modelled and reinforced effective hand hygiene routines, helping children to develop healthy habits. These practices contributed positively to infection prevention and control.

## How good is our leadership?

**4 - Good**

We made an evaluation of good, for this key question. As several important strengths taken together clearly outweighed areas for improvement. Whilst some improvements were needed, the strengths identified had a significant positive impact on children's experiences.

### Quality Indicator 3.1: Quality assurance and improvement are led well

The setting had a clear and well-structured approach to quality assurance, which supported continuous improvement. The manager demonstrated a strong commitment to providing good quality experiences for children and families. They were visible, approachable and actively involved in the day-to-day life of the setting.

An ethos of reflection and learning was promoted by the manager, encouraging staff to engage in self-evaluation and improvement planning. This was well led, with a clear focus on enhancing children's wellbeing and experiences. Improvement priorities were focused, achievable and regularly reviewed, with progress monitored effectively. Staff feedback was actively sought and used to inform changes, fostering a culture of shared ownership and continuous improvement. This approach reflected a responsive approach to quality assurance and recent improvements to the environment and mealtime experiences had a positive impact on children's outcomes.

Support and supervision systems were in place and provided staff with opportunities to reflect on their practice. Targeted development sessions focusing on play and quality interactions had been delivered as part of the service's improvement journey. These sessions aimed to enhance staff understanding of how to extend children's learning through responsive, purposeful engagement. While some positive changes in practice were observed, approaches were not yet consistently embedded across the team. The service should continue to support and monitor staff practice to ensure that the learning from these sessions are fully implemented and sustained in daily practice, leading to improved outcomes for all children.

### How good is our staff team?

### 3 - Adequate

We evaluated this key question as adequate. While the strengths had a positive impact, key areas need to improve.

#### Quality Indicator 4.3: Staff deployment

The service was experiencing staffing pressures, which were having a noticeable impact on the quality of care provided. Staffing challenges limited the ability to maintain stable staffing levels. As a result, the approach to staffing was not outcome focussed and the number of staff present was not adequate to meet the needs of all children. While staff were working hard to meet children's needs, the reduced capacity affected the timeliness of support and responsiveness to individual needs, particularly for children requiring additional support and assistance. The provider and manager were aware of the challenges and were actively seeking solutions; however, further strategic planning was needed to ensure that staffing arrangements sufficiently meet the needs of all children. **(See Area for improvement 1)**

Staff were generally positioned to support children's needs and routines, and most interactions were positive and respectful. However, there were inconsistencies in how staff engaged with children, with some interactions appearing task-focused and lacking warmth. While children were able to form attachments with key staff members, the overall approach to deployment did not always ensure that children's choices and preferences were fully acknowledged.

Staff worked well together as a team. They communicated effectively with one another, demonstrating mutual respect and a shared commitment to supporting children's wellbeing. In several instances, staff stepped in to support each other showing flexibility and a strong sense of teamwork. This cohesive approach contributed to a calm environment for children.

## Areas for improvement

1. To ensure children are safe and receive high quality experiences at all times the provider and manager should as a minimum, review and make appropriate changes to staff deployment, to improve experiences for children.

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

## 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?	3 - Adequate
1.1 Nurturing care and support	3 - Adequate
1.3 Play and learning	3 - Adequate

How good is our setting?	4 - Good
2.2 Children experience high quality facilities	4 - 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?	3 - Adequate
4.3 Staff deployment	3 - Adequate

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