

25 January 2022

Dear Parent/Carer

Her Majesty's Inspectors of Education are currently carrying out visits to some schools and early learning and childcare settings across Scotland. When we wrote to you after the last inspection of Udney Station Pre-school Playgroup, we said that we would engage with the setting to report on progress. We recently engaged in discussion with staff and the local authority and carried out a virtual visit. Our engagement helped us learn more about how children and their families, have been supported through the COVID-19 pandemic. We also heard about approaches that have been working well to support children's health and wellbeing, learning and progress. We discussed with the manager and the local authority officer the setting's progress in taking forward the recommendations from our original inspection.

This letter sets out what we found during our visit.

Supporting children, young people and families through COVID-19

Since the previous inspection, Udney Station Pre-school Playgroup has experienced significant staffing challenges. This is as a result of COVID-19 and changes to the practitioner team. The playgroup has welcomed a new lead practitioner and a practitioner to the small team. The new team work very well together. Parents report that the manager and practitioners have worked hard to ensure the ongoing care and support of children. The manager and practitioners provided good support to children and families during closure periods and on return to the setting. They have been extremely responsive to children's and families' needs. This included personalised transition arrangements for children who required additional support to return to the setting or to begin a new placement. All children are now happy and settled as a result of this approach.

During closure periods, the manager and practitioners used social media well to ensure there was ongoing communication with families. In addition, the manager and practitioners introduced electronic learning journals to support learning at home. Practitioners shared experiences for children to engage with during home learning periods and parents uploaded their comments, photographs and examples of children's play. The manager, practitioners and parents report that positive relationships have been maintained during this challenging time.

Progress with recommendations from previous inspection

Local authority officers, the manager, practitioners and parents report that the quality of experiences for children continue to improve. The manager and practitioners have increased their knowledge and improved their practice through support from local authority officers and from participation in professional learning. In particular, the manager has benefitted from attending training on leadership. She is clear on her vision for the setting and is now leading a review of the setting's vision and values involving a range of stakeholders. The manager recognises the importance of the vision and values being meaningful, relevant and aspirational for all involved with the setting. She continues to gain confidence in her

leadership of the setting and is supporting practitioners well. Self-evaluation is becoming a more regular feature using national and local self-evaluation tools to evaluate practice. This is enabling the manager and practitioners to be clearer on the setting's strengths and the areas that require further improvement. This now needs to be fully embedded and involve all stakeholders. Children's experiences are improving as a result of regular monitoring and feedback to practitioners.

Professional learning has increased the confidence, knowledge and skills of practitioners. The learning environment continues to improve which is resulting in children being more engaged in their learning. Practitioners continue to review and adapt curriculum planning. Children are now more involved in the process and have increased opportunities to extend their interests and ideas. They are more independent and have a greater voice within the setting. The quality of outdoor play and the use of the local community for woodland visits and walks have improved. Children have increased access to a wider range of experiences, open-ended materials and resources to support learning outdoors. They are developing their imagination, problem solving, literacy and numeracy skills and an awareness of how to keep safe when outdoors. Moving forward, it will be useful for the manager and practitioners to review the approach to accessing the outdoor space attached to the setting. Children will benefit from having increased access to this space throughout the session.

Practitioners have a deeper understanding of child development through effective professional learning with a focus on the youngest children attending the setting. This has enabled practitioners to respond better to children's individual stage of development.

Children continue to make progress in their learning. Practitioners use developmental overviews and trackers for literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing. They continue to develop their skills in observing children's play and recording significant learning. Practitioners, as a relatively new team, plan to revisit observation training that took place before COVID-19. This can ensure a shared understanding of the assessment process for very young children. The information gathered on children's learning supports practitioners to make professional judgements in order to provide appropriate levels of support and challenge for individual children. Children's learning is more visible through the continued use of electronic journals. This is helping parents to feel more involved in their child's learning. Feedback from parents indicates that they would like this level of engagement to continue.

Practitioners' knowledge and understanding of statutory duties and codes of practice has improved through a range of professional learning sessions and a review of policies and procedures.

Children continue to develop an awareness of the national wellbeing indicators through their play and real-life contexts. This is having a positive impact on their understanding of what it means to be safe, healthy and active. Practitioners are currently planning to develop this further through the introduction of specific child-friendly characters for each indicator. This change of approach can support children to become familiar with all of indicators in a meaningful way.

Overall, the setting has continued to make progress in the areas identified at the previous inspection. With support from the local authority, Udney Station Pre-School Playgroup are well placed to develop further. The manager and practitioners demonstrate more confidence and

are committed to professional learning. The team are stronger and motivated to make the necessary improvements to provide quality early learning and childcare.

What happens next?

Understandably, the setting has been responding to the challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. These have had a significant impact on the work of the setting. Staff are implementing plans to support recovery. Staff have addressed the recommendations from the original inspection successfully. As a result, we will make no more visits to the setting in connection with the original inspection. Aberdeenshire Council will continue to inform parents about the setting's progress as part of its usual arrangements for reporting on the quality of its education service.

Sandra Kehoe
HM Inspector