An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

EARLY YEARS EDUCATION INSPECTION

REPORT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting Name</th>
<th>Stepping Stones</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Setting Address</td>
<td>St. Mary’s Community Centre</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rathowen</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mullingar</td>
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<td></td>
<td>County Westmeath</td>
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<tr>
<td>DCYA number</td>
<td>09WH0040</td>
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Date of Inspection: 07-06-2019
WHAT IS AN EARLY YEARS EDUCATION INSPECTION?

The Early Years Education Inspection (EYEI) model is used to provide evaluative information, advice and support in relation to education provision in a pre-school setting participating in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme. These inspections affirm good practice and advise actions, where appropriate, to aid the further development of education provision in the setting.

HOW TO READ THIS REPORT

During this inspection, the inspector evaluated and reported under the following headings or areas of enquiry:

1. Quality of the context to support children’s learning and development
2. Quality of processes to support children’s learning and development
3. Quality of children’s learning experiences and achievements
4. Quality of management and leadership for learning

Inspectors describe the quality of each of these areas using the Inspectorate’s quality continuum which is shown on the final page of this report. The quality continuum provides examples of the language used by inspectors when evaluating and describing the quality of the setting’s provision in each area.
Early Years Education Inspection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date of inspection</th>
<th>07-06-2019</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inspection activities undertaken</td>
<td>Interaction with children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Meeting with setting manager</td>
<td>• Review of relevant documents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Observation of interactions during a number of sessions</td>
<td>• Feedback to setting manager and practitioners</td>
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CONTEXT OF SETTING

Stepping Stones is a community run setting. It was established in 2000 and is centrally located in the village of Rathowen. The setting provides a morning session for children availing of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme and an after-school service. On the morning of the inspection, sixteen children, three practitioners, one of whom is made available through the Community Employment (CE) Programme, and a student practitioner were present. The manager is available throughout the morning to offer support and assistance as needed. The early years setting was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and actions advised of the report, and the response of the setting will be found in the appendix of this report.

AREA 1

QUALITY OF CONTEXT TO SUPPORT CHILDREN’S LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

- The quality of the context to support the children’s learning and development is good.
- The setting provides transport to and from the children’s homes and most children avail of this service. Practitioners warmly welcome children on arrival. A relaxed atmosphere is evident as children become engaged in their play.
- The recent transition to a more child-initiated daily routine appears to be working effectively. On the morning of the inspection, the children benefitted from having autonomy to choose and decide their own learning and development activities.
- Secure relationships between children and practitioners are evident. Practitioners are respectful and show sensitivity in their interactions with the children. Elements of the key person approach are in place. This approach is one where each child is assigned a named person who is primarily responsible for creating a close relationships with the child and his/her family. There is little evidence to suggest that children or parents are aware of their key practitioner.
- Snack time is a relaxed occasion where practitioners and children sit together. Children are encouraged to be independent; they confidently serve themselves fruit and sandwiches while engaging in natural and free-flowing conversations with their peers and practitioners.
- Imagery displayed in the environment gives recognition to the children and their families. Photographs of the children and their families, a celebration of each child’s birthday and displays of the children’s various creative work provide an opportunity for each child to develop an awareness of themselves.
- The children attending the setting represent a variety of cultures. Respect and recognition for this cultural diversity is not strongly evident throughout the learning programme.
- Practitioners capitalise on the daily bus trips that most children make to and from the setting to develop children’s awareness of their local community. The manager reported that there are regular discussions about the various facilities and services the children see while on the bus. The annual visits to the fire station and to meet Santa also support the children’s awareness of their local community and its members.

Actions advised

- The practitioners are advised to give greater visibility to each child’s key person so that both children and parents are more aware of, and informed about, the key practitioner. This will support children and parents in identifying their familiar point of contact and will help to strengthen the link between the setting and the children’s families.
• Practitioners are advised to provide consistent opportunities for all children to have their cultures, languages and backgrounds valued and affirmed during the learning programme.

AREA 2

QUALITY OF PROCESSES TO SUPPORT CHILDREN’S LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

• The quality of the processes to support the children’s learning and development is good.
• Curriculum provision for children’s learning is linked to Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework. A play-based approach is used to inform the learning programme. Short-term plans focus on themes and seasonal events, with some recognition of children’s new and emerging interests.
• Learning records are used as the main approach to assessment in the setting. On a monthly basis, practitioners document brief snapshots that provide some insight into individual children’s learning experiences.
• Many effective interaction strategies are used by practitioners. The practitioners view children as competent learners and as a result they are provided with age-appropriate responsibilities throughout the session.
• On arrival in the setting, the children divide into two groups. The older children remain in the main learning environment while the younger children have recently begun using the adjoining community hall. The main learning environment is well maintained and inviting. It has been carefully prepared and offers a variety of literacy resources which are regularly used by the children. The resources offered in the community hall are less supportive of the development of children’s curiosity, creativity and imagination.
• Children’s language skills are supported through brief periods of rhymes, songs and jingles. There were some good examples of practitioners modelling appropriate language during their interactions with children. There is scope for practitioners to place a greater emphasis on an expanded use of vocabulary and language during their interactions with children, particularly for the many children for whom English is an additional language.
• Until recently, the children have been benefiting from their use of the large and spacious community playground that is located near the setting. At the time of the inspection, maintenance work prevented the children from using this space. In the interim, the children have daily access to a small outdoor courtyard and the adjoining football pitch.
• The provision of play has become central to children’s learning and development. Practitioners are commended for their open and receptive focus on play and the manner in which they continue to adapt to this approach.

Actions advised
• Practitioners are advised to re-evaluate the learning environment in the community hall with a view to providing similarly defined and resourced learning spaces to those in the main pre-school room. The self-evaluation tools in the ‘Environment’ pillar of the Aistear, Síolta Practice Guide are a useful resource in this regard.
• The practitioners are advised to provide additional scaffolding in their promotion of children’s oral language skills. For example, practitioners could model language to support children’s interests and learning experiences through discussion, role play, games and visual resources.

AREA 3

QUALITY OF CHILDREN’S LEARNING EXPERIENCES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

• The quality of the children’s learning experiences and achievements is good.
• Children appear happy and content in the setting. They demonstrate particular interest and engagement in their socio-dramatic play and musical learning experiences.
• The children demonstrate emerging social skills. Most children take turns and play co-operatively with their peers and many emerging friendships are evident.
• Some children demonstrate effective communication skills. On the day of the inspection, many children relied heavily on their non-verbal communication skills and abilities. Time was not allocated for the children to reflect on and share their learning experiences as a group.
The children’s gross and fine motor skills are developing well. This was evident during the small-group periods in the outdoor environment where the children climbed, ran and cycled. It was also evident when they manipulated materials and engaged in activities, such as mark-making, jigsaws, and painting.

Children benefit from the freedom they have to make decisions about their learning and during their learning experiences. They move resources from one area to another with a view to extending their ideas and thinking through play.

Children are provided with opportunities to experience achievement during their learning experiences and through the positive and affirming responses of practitioners. The development of individual children’s learning journals are in their infancy and are not currently accessible to the children.

Some children demonstrate an awareness of members their local community. For example, during the inspection, one child made reference to his knowledge of fire stations when discussing his fire fighter costume.

**Actions advised**

- Practitioners are advised to progress the development of individual learning journals that document and capture individual children’s achievements in a range of connected learning experiences. Making these journals freely available and accessible to the children will support them in recognising themselves as successful learners.

- The practitioners are advised to provide regular opportunities for the children to reflect on and share their learning experiences in small groups. This will support children to feel more comfortable to share information about their learning, thoughts, ideas and interests in a safe and secure environment and support their language development.

**AREA 4**

**QUALITY OF MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP FOR LEARNING**

- The quality of management and leadership for learning is good.

- The manager and practitioners demonstrate a clear commitment to delivering quality provision for the children in the setting. They work well together and display an ethos of good teamwork.

- The manager and practitioners meet on a regular basis to reflect on and review their practice. Brief minutes of these meetings are kept and are used to implement change and improvements in the setting.

- Recently, the manager and practitioners have proactively engaged with the Better Start Quality Development Service. This involves a mentor working alongside the team to strengthen quality provision in the setting. As part of this process, practitioners have begun to use the self-evaluation tools from the *Aistear, Siolta Practice Guide* to inform and guide their practice.

- Many of the practitioners started working in the setting under the CE Programme. They have since upskilled and joined the team of practitioners. All practitioners attend workshops and training courses provided by the local county childcare committee.

- Various informal means of communication are used to make parents aware of the setting’s policies, procedures and curriculum. These include phone calls, letters and a social media page. Formal opportunities are also provided through an annual parent-practitioner meeting. The setting’s bus service is offered to parents to travel to and from this meeting. The lengths to which the manager and practitioners go to supporting parents to attend this meeting are praiseworthy.

- The manager reports a positive working relationship with the local primary school. She accompanies the children and their families to the annual open day to support and assist in the children’s move from the early years setting to primary school. Currently, children do not have an access to visuals that would support and prepare them for their move to primary school.

- Prior to starting in the setting, parents visit and receive an enrolment pack. This includes a parent handbook outlining the setting’s key policies and procedures.

- Links have been established between the manager and local district nurse who work closely together to ensure families from neighbouring villages and towns are aware that their children can avail of the ECCE programme in the setting.
**Actions advised**

- The manager and practitioners are advised to engage in the *National Síolta Aistear Initiative*. Engagement in this training programme will support a whole-team approach to provision and provide an opportunity for all team members to review and become familiar with current best practices.
- Practitioners are advised to plan and prepare additional ways to support children in their move from the setting to primary school. For example, books about moving to primary school, visuals of the local schools and resources that reflect what the children can expect to see in school, may be useful in building children’s awareness and familiarity with primary school.
### Summary of Overall Inspection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Quality Level</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quality of context to support children's learning and development</td>
<td>Good</td>
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<td>Quality of management and leadership for learning</td>
<td>Good</td>
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### Language used in Early Years Education Inspection reports

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Provision</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very good</td>
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<td>Good</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fair</td>
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<td>Poor</td>
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*Published February 2020*
APPENDIX

SETTING RESPONSE TO THE REPORT
SUBMITTED ON BEHALF OF THE SETTING

Area 1 Observations on the content of the inspection report.

Area 2 Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection.

Area 1
- Each child has a key worker since our inspection. This will support parents and children.
- All children have their cultures, languages and backgrounds valued and we celebrate all cultures in our classroom.

Area 2
- All practitioners promote children’s oral language skills through role play, games, and visual resources.
- The community hall is no longer used, we use only the main classroom.

Area 3
- All children have learning journals to capture the children’s achievements and they are freely available and accessible to the children.
- We have started short-term planning and it has gotten the children involved.

Area 4
- We have so much support from Better Start, we have come on so much. We are also getting the community involved.