

Ness Castle Nursery Day Care of Children

Ness Castle Primary School
Brodie Road
INVERNESS
IV2 6FW

Type of inspection:
Unannounced

Completed on:
20 May 2025

Service provided by:
Highland Council

Service provider number:
SP2003001693

Service no:
CS2022000241

About the service

Ness Castle Nursery is registered to provide a care service to a maximum of 110 children at any one time, from the age of three years up to children attending primary school. The Service is operated by The Highland Council. The head teacher is the registered manager and the service operates term time only.

The service is located within Ness Castle Primary School in Inverness. It has its own separate entrance. The nursery premises consists of a large open plan playroom and there is a separate area for school aged children. There is an enclosed outdoor play area which extends children's play and learning experiences.

The service is situated in a residential area near a supermarket and other local amenities. At the time of the inspection there were 61 nursery children and 21 school aged children in attendance.

About the inspection

This was an unannounced inspection which took place on 19 and 20 May 2025. The inspection was carried out by three inspectors 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
- spoke with visiting professionals
- reviewed online feedback from 12 parents and carers.

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

- School aged and nursery children benefitted from warm, caring relationships from staff.
- Parents spoke positively of the staff team.
- Children experienced a calm and sociable lunchtime.
- Children's individual wellbeing did not consistently benefit from the effective use of personal planning.
- Improvements had been made to the indoor playroom, this meant children were more engaged in meaningful play experiences.
- Staff deployment did not consistently meet children's needs and the approach to staffing was not always outcome focussed.
- Quality assurance processes need to be embedded to secure sustained improvements across the service.
- Three requirements and one area for improvement remain unmet since our inspection in December 2024. The service needs to take immediate action to ensure the pace of change secures positive outcomes for children and their families.

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?	3 - Adequate
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

Overall, children were nurtured and supported throughout their experiences. School aged and nursery children benefitted from warm, caring relationships from staff. They offered comfort, cuddles and caring interactions when needed. This provided children with reassurance and supported their wellbeing, contributing to them feeling valued and respected. However, due to competing demands placed on staff, they did not always pick up on nursery children's cues for support and interaction. As a result, children did not always receive the right support at the right time. Parents spoke positively of the staff team. One parent commented, "The staff have always made the effort to get to know us and our child. They are very approachable and supportive".

Children's individual wellbeing did not consistently benefit from the effective use of personal planning. 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. We made a requirement about ensuring each child receives appropriate care and support and their needs are met at our inspection in December 2024, and extended the date for meeting the requirement at our inspection in March 2025 which has been restated. (See Requirement 1 under 'What the service has done to meet any requirements made at or since the last inspection?')

Children were able to choose when they could come for snack and were provided with opportunities to develop independence skills. For example, they were able to pour their own drinks. Some children in the nursery benefitted from a social snack time experience, providing opportunities to support and extend children's social and communication skills.

Children experienced a calm and sociable lunchtime. They were responsible for scraping their own plates, which encouraged some opportunities for independence. Staff sat with children eating, which promoted good eating habits, manners and supported a sociable experience. The service should now consider how they can further enhance opportunities to promote independence at lunchtime, for example, self-serving their own food.

Establishing good working relationship with parents was important to the staff team. Parents were welcomed into the cloakroom area of the setting at pick up and drop off, this provided some opportunities for parents to share information with staff. However, the quality of information at handover was limited. Most parents felt communication was good. However, a few parents commented that handovers were variable and could be better. The service may wish to consider reviewing their drop off and collection procedures. Parents told us:

"It is always very busy at pick up time, so we don't get information on what my child has eaten that day";
and

"There isn't much time for feedback on a daily basis due to the busy environment and constraints of staff and their duties. For example, our key worker is excellent at giving feedback for that day on collection but if they aren't there then this information just isn't shared and it's minimal if it is and there are a lot of staff changes as to who has been working with my child so hard to get consistent feedback and communication".

Quality Indicator 1.3: Play and learning

On the whole, most children in the nursery were engaged and motivated in their play and were having fun with other children. We heard them laughing together as they participated in a variety of play experiences including active, energetic play outdoors. This stimulated their natural curiosity, learning and creativity. However, on occasions some children in the nursery were disengaged and would have benefitted from more adult interaction to enable them to feel included.

School aged children benefitted from positive play and learning experiences. Several children were engaged in role play, pretending to be hairdressers in their imaginary salon. These experiences supported their social, emotional and cognitive development as well as allowing them to explore real-world routines in a safe and creative environment.

For most of the time, children benefitted from uninterrupted play allowing them to become absorbed and have fun. This increased their happiness and engagement levels. However, on occasion children's choice in their play was restricted. At times, children's play and learning was interrupted to undertake adult directed activities. This was particularly evident in the nursery, during times of transitions. For example, before going outside, lunchtime and children going home. This significantly reduced children's engagement levels and resulted in missed opportunities to support creativity. The service should now review the flow of the day, including transitions to support children to have longer periods of play and more choice in their play experiences.

We saw some skilled interactions from staff that contributed to children being supported to develop their skills and learning but this was not consistent. There were examples of staff extending children's play through learning conversations, contributing to the development of early language and numeracy skills. However, on occasions, staff did not respond to children's cues to extend their play experiences. This resulted in missed opportunities to support children to widen their skills and learning. We made an area for improvement in relation to ensuring staff have the appropriate skills to support children's wellbeing and development at our inspection in December 2024 and this remains unmet. (See Area for improvement 1 under 'What the service has done to meet any areas for improvement we made at or since the last inspection?')

Planning approaches were mostly based around children's ideas which resulted in staff providing daily experiences that were child centred. This impacted positively on children's emotional wellbeing. However, there was scope to develop this further to support depth and breadth in children's learning and to be more responsive. Intentional approaches to planning needed further development to ensure planned experiences were always developmentally appropriate and tailored to meet individual learning needs. Processes for evaluating children's progress and achievements did not support staff to appropriately respond and plan for individual development needs. As a result, children were not yet being fully supported to develop a broad range of lifelong learning skills.

How good is our setting?**4 - Good**

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

Quality Indicator 2.2: Children experience high quality facilities

The indoor playroom was welcoming with plenty of natural light and ventilation. The staff team had considered the experiences and spaces available within the learning environment. As a result, the playroom was set out in a manner which enabled children to access resources easily and lead their own play.

Since the last inspection, resources were better presented and encouraged exploration, enquiry and fun. Opportunities to explore literacy and numeracy were naturally included within the setting. There were real resources, such as phones and cookbooks, for the children to explore in the home corner. The continuous provision indoors had been considered to include a variety of open-ended resources, enabling children to explore opportunities which promoted their curiosity and imagination. We observed children following their own interests in the craft area, creating pictures with a range of craft materials. Children's interests had also been considered within the environment, with a recent interest in spring reflected in the provocations, resources and objects available to play with. This supported children to feel engaged and included within the environment. The service should continue to develop and embed the use of exciting provocations across the environment.

There were cosy areas for children to rest and relax which supported their emotional needs. Staff and children also used these areas for reading stories. We observed nurturing attachments between staff and children during these experiences. This supported children's language development as well as their sense of well-being. Although the service had worked hard to develop cosy areas within the indoor environment, we noted further scope for improvement in relation to this. We asked them to continue to develop more homely touches across the indoor environment for both nursery and school aged children.

The outdoor area was an interesting and exciting space for children and provided a range of play opportunities to extend learning. Outdoors, children had access to a selection of loose parts, large sandpit and mud kitchen. Children used the outdoor space with confidence and experienced enjoyment, challenge and fun. Areas to climb, run and balance provided opportunities for children to develop their gross motor skills.

Children were not always supported and supervised to wash hands at key times throughout the day. As a result, handwashing on occasions was ineffective and had the potential to spread infection.

How good is our leadership?**3 - Adequate**

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

Quality Indicator 3.1: Quality assurance and improvement are well led

A shared vision for improvement was not evident across the service. This resulted in inconsistent care and support and impacted on the ability to drive change in the setting. The management team should consider revisiting the vision, values and aims of the service and involve all stake holders in the process.

Some quality assurance processes ensured aspects of the service were being reviewed and monitored in a focused and meaningful way. For example, changes to the indoor environment resulted in children experiencing a more positive environment. However, there were still significant gaps in the quality assurance processes in place. The service should consider extending processes further to ensure all planned improvements are done in a measured way.

Self-evaluation processes were evolving; however, they were not yet regular or robust enough to secure sustained improvements. Processes had allowed staff to reflect on their practice and identify areas for improvement. However, actions were not being routinely evaluated or reviewed to assess the impact on children's experiences. To support more reflective practice and improved outcomes for children, self-evaluation needs to be more firmly embedded.

Some monitoring had been undertaken to evaluate staff's practice and children's play experiences. However, detailed next steps and actions to be addressed had not been consistently followed up. As a result, there was not a clear cycle of improvement in place to ensure identified improvements were impacting positively on children's experiences.

Support and supervision systems were in place for staff in the nursery. These provided opportunities for staff to meet with management to discuss their personal targets. However, they were not yet consistently enabling staff to reflect on practice and make improvements. We discussed with the manager and provider, ways in which the service could strengthen their processes. For example, linking support and feedback to formalised observation of staff practice.

The requirement made in relation to effective quality assurance processes which has been in place since December 2024 has been restated. The service now needs to take immediate action to ensure the pace of change secures positive outcomes for children and their families. (See Requirement 3 under 'What the service has done to meet any requirements made at or since the last inspection?')

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

Children in the nursery were familiar with the staff looking after them and most were settled. Overall, staff supported the basic care needs of the children and were warm and friendly in their approach. Older children had developed good attachments to the staff working with them, contributing to positive relationships.

The ethos between team members in both the nursery and school aged childcare was positive and interactions between staff were kind and respectful. This helped create a positive atmosphere for both staff and children to feel comfortable and secure in. At times, the staff team communicated well with each other when a task took them away from their designated area. For example, they would inform each other when leaving the room or when attending to a child's needs. However, this was not always consistent throughout the day and there were times where a lack of communication resulted in missed opportunities for high quality interactions.

Staff deployment did not consistently meet children's needs. On occasions staff were task orientated and not always aware of their positioning in relation to supporting interactions, experiences and outcomes. This was particularly noticeable when children played outside, during busier times of the day and throughout daily transitions. As a result, staff did not always pick up on cues from children for support or interaction. This had the potential to compromise children's safety and impacted on play experiences. Staff deployment was identified as a requirement at our December 2024 inspection and the date for meeting the requirement was extended at our inspection in March 2025. This remains unmet and has been restated. (See requirement 2 under 'What the service has done to meet any areas for improvement we made at or since the last inspection?')

The approach to staffing was not consistently outcome focused and did not take into account the complexity of children's needs. Children who required additional support were not allocated a designated staff member to support their development needs. Staff supporting individual children changed frequently throughout the day. Additionally, continuity across the week had not always been well considered. This did not promote positive attachments.

What the service has done to meet any requirements we made at or since the last inspection

Requirements

Requirement 1

By 24 February 2025, the provider must ensure each child receives appropriate care and support and their needs are met.

To do this the provider must at a minimum ensure:

- a) Personal plans set out children's current needs and how they will be met.
- b) All staff are knowledgeable and understand the information within the personal plans and use this to effectively meet each child's needs.
- c) Personal plans are regularly reviewed and updated in partnership with parents to reflect children's current needs.

This is to comply with Regulation 5(1)(2) – (Personal plans) of The Social Care and Social Work Improvement Scotland (Requirements for Care Services) Regulations 2011 (SSI 2011/210).

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).

This requirement was made on 6 December 2024.

Action taken on previous requirement

Effective personal planning for children was not consistent within the service. Most personal plans were reviewed and updated in partnership with parents; however, some personal plans did not reflect children's current needs. For some children there were no clear identified strategies of support and where strategies were identified not all staff were knowledgeable and understood the information within personal plans to meet individual needs. This had potential to compromise continuity and consistency in care.

This requirement has not been fully met and has been extended to 31 October 2025.

Not met

Requirement 2

By 24 February 2025, the provider must ensure that children are effectively supported and supervised in order to keep them safe.

To do this the provider must at a minimum:

- a) ensure staffing is well planned to keep children safe and their needs are met
- b) ensure staff communicate and work together effectively
- c) monitor staff practice and deployment, and where necessary, make improvements
- d) effective systems are implemented to ensure children are always accounted for.

This is in order to comply with section 7(1)(a) of the Health and Care (Staffing) (Scotland) Act 2019.

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

'I am confident that people respond promptly, including when I ask for help' (HSCS 3.17); and

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

This requirement was made on 6 December 2024.

Action taken on previous requirement

Some monitoring and changes to staff practice had been introduced, which meant staff deployment was better than the previous inspection. However, there were still improvements required, as staff deployment did not consistently meet children's needs. On occasions staff were task orientated and not always aware of their positioning in relation to supporting interactions, experiences and outcomes. This was particularly noticeable when children played outside, during busier times of the day and throughout daily transitions. As a result, staff did not always pick up on cues from children for support or interaction. This had the potential to compromise children's safety and impacted on play experiences.

At times, the staff team communicated well with each other when a task took them away from their designated area. For example, they would inform each other when leaving the room or when attending to a child's needs. However, this was not always consistent throughout the day and there were times where a lack of communication resulted in missed opportunities for high quality interactions.

The approach to staffing was not consistently outcome focused and did not take into account the complexity of children's needs. Children who required additional support were not allocated a designated staff member to support their development needs. Staff supporting individual children changed frequently throughout the day. Additionally, continuity across the week had not always been well considered. This did not promote positive attachments.

Improved systems ensured staff were aware of the number of children they were responsible for. Staff regularly counted the number of children in each area and told other staff if they were taking children to another area of the setting. The use of walkie talkies improved staff communication and allowed them to stay in contact across different areas of the setting such as, the indoor and outdoor spaces.

This requirement has not been fully met and has been extended to 31 October 2025.

Not met

Requirement 3

By 4 April 2025, the provider must ensure improved outcomes for children by implementing effective systems of quality assurance.

To do this the provider must at a minimum, ensure:

- a) the manager effectively monitors the work of each member of staff and the service as a whole
- b) clear and effective plans are in place for maintaining and improving the service
- c) effective audits of accident and incidents, and medication are in place.

This is to comply with Regulation 3 Principles and Regulation 15 (a) and (b) Staffing of The Social Care and Social Work Improvement Scotland (Requirements for Care Services) Regulations 2011 (SSI 2011/210).

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 requirement was made on 6 December 2024.

Action taken on previous requirement

Some monitoring had taken place which focused on staff practice. Areas for improvement were identified. However, these were not consistently followed up to support development.

An action plan had been created following our inspection in December 2024 and March 2025. However, there was not a shared responsibility and accountability for taking forward identified areas for development. This impacted on the pace of change and the service has been too slow in making improvements, to ensure children receive high quality care and support.

Some audits had taken place, although there continues to be gaps in the auditing. For example, effective audits of personal planning was not yet embedded into practice and we noted gaps in the auditing of medication for school aged childcare.

This requirement has not been fully met and has been extended to 31 October 2025.

Not met

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 effectively deliver high quality play and learning experiences, the manager should support staff to access training appropriate to their role and apply the training to their practice.

This should include but is not limited to:

- a) supporting and extending children's learning through high quality interactions and effective questioning
- b) using best practice guidance to support high quality play experiences
- c) using children's interests to plan experiences.

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).

This area for improvement was made on 6 December 2024.

Action taken since then

Staff had accessed some training in relation to quality interactions. However, the impact of this was not yet evident across the whole staff team. There were a few examples of staff using open ended questioning to support children's thinking. However, on occasions there was missed opportunities to extend children's learning and widen their skills through play. This meant that staff were not effectively responding to children's interests and needs.

The service should continue to monitor staff practice, to ensure interactions are always of a high quality and that all staff have the skills and knowledge to deliver high quality play and learning experiences. We signposted the service to best practice guidance "Realising the Ambition" to support them with making improvements.

This area for improvement has not been met and remains in place.

Previous area for improvement 2

To promote children's continued learning, development and enjoyment, children should have access to a wide range of literacy and numeracy resources and experiences, which are challenging and suitable to their individual interests and stages of development. There should be a sufficient number of resources to enable children to make independent choices and engage in deep and meaningful play.

This is to ensure that care and support is consistent with the Health and Social Care Standards (HSCS) which state that: 'As a child, I can direct my own play and activities in the way that I choose and freely access a wide range of experiences and resources suitable for my age and stage, which stimulate my natural curiosity, learning and creativity' (HSCS 2.27).

This area for improvement was made on 6 December 2024.

Action taken since then

To promote children's continued learning, development and enjoyment, improvements had been made to the range of literacy and numeracy resources on offer. There was also now a sufficient number of resources available. As a result, children were more engaged in meaningful play experiences.

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.

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?	3 - Adequate
3.1 Quality assurance and improvement are led well	3 - Adequate
How good is our staff team?	3 - Adequate
4.3 Staff deployment	3 - Adequate

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