



What we inspect in funded non-maintained nursery and childcare settings

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Introduction

This handbook sets out what inspectors need to consider when evaluating the three inspection themes in non-maintained nursery settings. It explains ‘What we inspect’. The guidance is essential reading for inspectors and all other members of the inspection team. It may also be useful for providers to support their understanding of the inspection guidance. There is separate guidance that explains the inspection process and methodology, ‘How we inspect’. The three inspection areas are set out below:

Theme 1: Well-being and Care

Theme 2: Teaching, Learning, Play and Development

Theme 3: Leadership and Development.

There is further information about inspections on our websites www.estyn.gov.wales and [Home | Care Inspectorate Wales](#).

How we will evaluate the themes

Inspectors will always provide clear evaluations against the key focus areas within each Theme, as illustrated below. However, the specific aspects they comment on may vary depending on the context of the setting and the significance of their findings. Inspectors may also report “by exception.” This means they will highlight particular strengths or areas for improvement, rather than commenting on every aspect in detail.

Where inspectors identify any interesting or innovative practice that is worthy of sharing more widely, they will include a short ‘spotlight on’ the practice within the report (a short paragraph). We will showcase a range of these spotlights on our websites. Where inspectors identify important shortcomings in one or more inspection areas, the setting will normally require ‘follow-up’. There is further guidance about follow-up activity in our guidance about ‘How we inspect’.

Inspectors use a wide range of evidence to make sure that their findings are accurate and reliable. They should weigh up the evidence and determine ratings on the basis of a best fit with the ratings descriptors. Ratings will take into consideration the quality of provision alongside a child’s age and stage of development.

Inspections will cover all themes and key questions of the inspection framework. However, inspectors

should only report on learning for three- and four-year-olds when there are six or more three or four-year-old children in the setting at the time of the inspection, that do not receive funded education elsewhere (Theme 2).

Rating descriptions

Inspectors will give one rating for each theme across the setting's whole provision.

The following descriptions are intended as guidance to help inspectors to award ratings by considering the relative balance and significance of strengths and areas for improvement.

Excellent – significant strengths, including many examples of highly effective practice

Good – many strengths and no important areas requiring significant improvement

Adequate – strengths outweigh weaknesses, but improvements are required

Poor – important weaknesses outweigh strengths and significant improvements are required

When awarding ratings, inspectors will consider the impact on children's well-being, learning and development.

Quantifiers

In reports, we use the following quantifiers to reflect proportions, where appropriate.

nearly all = with very few exceptions

most = 90% or more

many = 70% or more

a majority = over 60%

half = 50%

around half = close to 50%

a minority = below 40%

few = below 20%

very few = less than 10%

The inspection reports

Following an inspection, each provider will receive a report that will be published on both Estyn and CIW websites

About the setting

This section provides brief, factual background information about the setting.

Summary

This provides the ratings awarded for each theme.

Areas identified for improvement

This section notes any areas identified where improvement is needed in relation to outcomes for children and to meet regulations. This includes:

Priority Action Notice(s)(PAN)

If we find outcomes for children require significant improvement and/or there is risk to children's well-being we identify areas for Priority Action. In these circumstances we issue a Priority Action Notice(s) to the Provider, and they must take immediate steps to make improvements. We will inspect again within six months to check improvements have been made and outcomes for children have improved.

Areas for Improvement (AFI)

If we identify Areas for Improvement (AFI) but we have not found outcomes for children to be at immediate or significant risk, we discuss these with the provider. We expect the provider to take action, and we will follow this up at the next inspection.

Recommendations

Recommendations will come directly from the content of the report, identify what needs to improve and will be written in order of the themes.

What happens next

The ‘What happens next’ section will set out what the provider needs to do following the inspection. In all cases, leaders will need to respond to the recommendations or areas identified for improvement as well as any breach of regulations. They will need to put in place a set of actions needed to make the required improvements identified by the inspection team.

Follow-up

This section will explain if the setting requires follow-up and the reasons why.

Main Findings

The main findings section presents the inspection outcomes across three themes:

Theme 1: Well-being and Care

This considers how well practitioners support children’s well-being, provide care, and how children respond.

Theme 2: Teaching, Learning, Play and Development

This considers how practitioners support children’s learning and development, and the impact on outcomes.

Theme 3: Leadership and Management

This considers the effectiveness of leadership and management within the setting.

Inspectors make one overall judgement for each theme, covering the setting’s provision as a whole.

Well-being and Care	Teaching, Learning, Play and Development	Leadership and Management
To what extent do children feel safe, happy, comfortable, and included? To what extent are children listened to, and their opinions valued? How well do children interact and develop relationships? How well do practitioners know the children and meet their individual needs?	How well do children make progress and develop independence? How well do practitioners promote children’s play, learning and development? How well do practitioners create an effective indoor and outdoor environment? How well do three- and four-year-old children who are funded to receive early education make progress in their learning? How well do practitioners teach, observe, and assess three- and four-year-old children who are funded to receive early education?	How effective is leadership? How effective are self-evaluation and improvement? How effective are partnerships? How effective is the management of staff? How well are children safeguarded? How well do leaders ensure the safety and suitability of the premises and resources?

What we evaluate in Theme 1: Well-being and Care

To what extent do children feel safe, happy, comfortable, and included?

Inspectors should evaluate how well children:

- feel secure, happy, comfortable and cope with separation from their parents and carers
- feel valued, included, and have their rights respected
- feel a sense of belonging
- know whom to talk to if they are unhappy or worried

Inspectors should evaluate how well practitioners:

- keep children safe
- provide a nurturing, caring and enabling atmosphere
- promote equality, diversity and inclusion
- treat all children with dignity and respect

To what extent are children listened to, and their opinions valued?

Inspectors should evaluate how well children:

- make choices and decisions
- express their views, contribute ideas and know they will be listened to

Inspectors should evaluate how well practitioners:

- respond to children's needs and interests
- listen to children and value all attempts at communication

How well do children interact and develop relationships?

Inspectors should evaluate how well children:

- form positive emotional attachments with practitioners and other children
- are beginning to understand their feelings and become sensitive to the emotions of others
- co-operate, take turns and share
- respect others and take care of equipment and resources
- begin to develop a sense of acceptable behaviour and are learning to manage and regulate their emotions

Inspectors should consider how well practitioners:

- model positive, respectful and caring interactions
- enable positive emotional attachments
- work in line with the setting's behaviour management policy and are consistent in their approach
- support children to express their feelings and manage / understand their emotions

How well do practitioners know the children and meet their individual needs?

Inspectors should evaluate how well practitioners:

- work with parents and carers to identify and meet individual needs and preferences of their child before and during their time at the setting
- meet children's health needs and dietary requirements
- prioritise inclusion
- establish trust and clear communication with parents and carers
- support transitions throughout each child's day

When considering children with additional learning needs Inspectors should consider how well practitioners:

- ensure children have full access to all areas of learning and receive tailored support that helps them make progress in their learning and development
- identify and assess individual needs effectively, and work closely with parents and carers, and external agencies

What we evaluate in theme 2: Teaching, Learning, Play and Development

How well do children make progress and develop independence?

Inspectors should evaluate how well children:

- engage actively in their play and learning
- persevere for an appropriate length of time
- sustain interest and concentration in activities and tasks
- gain a sense of achievement from their play and learning
- develop their physical, creative, cognitive and communication skills
- become confident and independent individuals

How well do practitioners promote children's play, learning, and development?

Inspectors should evaluate how well practitioners:

- use a sound understanding of child development, to plan for and promote children's progress
- provide activities and experiences that promote children's play, learning and development
- provide opportunities to develop children's independence
- monitor and evaluate children's progress and use the information to plan for the next steps in their play and development

How well do practitioners create an effective indoor and outdoor environment?

Inspectors should evaluate how well practitioners create an environment that:

- is welcoming, engaging, and ignites children's curiosity and a sense of awe and wonder of the natural world
- supports children to be physically active and to manage risks safely
- promotes and values diversity and inclusion
- promotes children's play, development and learning
- includes a range of good quality safe resources

The Welsh dimension

Inspectors should evaluate how well practitioners:

- promote children's awareness of the traditions, celebrations, ethos and values of the diverse cultures of Wales
- provide opportunities for children to make connections with their local area
- support children to develop their Welsh language skills, appropriate to their stage of development

How well do three- and four- year- old children who are funded to receive early education make progress in their learning?

Inspectors should evaluate how well children develop their:

- listening
- speaking
- early reading (See Appendix 1)
- mark-making skills
- mathematical
- digital
- physical
- creative
- problem-solving skills

In English-medium settings, inspectors must evaluate how well children are developing their Welsh language skills.

How well do practitioners teach, observe and assess three- and four-year-old children who are funded to receive early education?

Inspectors should evaluate how well practitioners:

- provide flexible, responsive play and learning experiences that promote children's all-round development in authentic contexts for learning
- model language
- set high expectations for children
- use questioning and feedback to promote children's thinking
- make decisions about when to intervene and when to observe and evaluate children's play and learning
- use a range of observations and assessments to understand each child's progress
- reflect on the progress of different groups, including those with additional learning needs

- ensure that learning experiences build systematically on what children know and can do, supporting progression in key skills including communication, literacy, numeracy and digital competence
- ensure the curriculum is broad and balanced, with opportunities for children to revisit, practise and consolidate their learning
- promote children’s spiritual, moral, social and cultural development

Inspectors should evaluate how well practitioners in English medium settings:

- provide opportunities for children to use and experience the Welsh language
- develop children’s Welsh language skills, taking into account their starting points

What we evaluate in Theme 3: Leadership and Management

How effective is leadership?

Inspectors should evaluate how well leaders and managers, including the registered person:

- set high expectations by supporting and challenging staff to do their best
- communicate their vision for the setting and communicate with others to achieve this are well informed about their statutory responsibilities and the setting's practices
- create a positive ethos in which children and staff feel safe and valued
- make effective use of the funding it receives, including the Early Years Development Grant (EYPDG) to support those children adversely impacted by poverty
- deliver the Welsh Language Active Offer

How effective are self-evaluation and improvement?

Inspectors should evaluate how well leaders:

- use first-hand evidence and the views of staff, parents and carers and children to accurately identify the setting's strengths and areas for improvement
- draw upon reviews, advice and feedback by external agencies, where appropriate
- implement sound strategies likely to bring about improvement

How effective are partnerships?

Inspectors should evaluate how well leaders and managers:

- establish trust and clear communication with partners
- work with a range of partners to support transition
- work with a range of partners to improve children's health, learning and well-being
- keep parents and carers well informed about their children's progress
- establish and foster effective links with the local community

How effective is the management of staff?

Inspectors should evaluate how well leaders and managers:

- support staff well-being
- ensure practitioners understand and fulfil their roles and responsibilities
- ensure all policies and procedures are manageable
- have an effective system for practitioners' supervision and appraisal that leads to agreed targets

- support all staff in increasing their professional knowledge, understanding and skills, and to learn from current best practice
- ensure there are sufficient practitioners who have relevant and appropriate qualifications and experiences for their role, and are deployed appropriately
- support staff to develop their Welsh language skills
- ensure appropriate contingency staffing arrangements are in place

How well are children safeguarded?

Inspectors must report on whether the setting's arrangements for safeguarding children meet requirements and give no cause for concern.

Inspectors must evaluate how well leaders:

- ensure a culture of safeguarding throughout the setting
- implement the setting's policies and procedures for safeguarding
- ensure all staff have completed suitable training and have a secure understanding of their responsibilities
- follow safe, robust and timely recruitment processes and ongoing suitability checks

How well do leaders ensure the safety and suitability of the premises and resources?

Inspectors should evaluate how well leaders and managers:

- ensure children are cared for in a safe, clean and secure environment
- provide sufficient facilities, space and resources to meet the children's needs
- ensure the layout and design promote children's independence
- provide appropriate arrangements to hold confidential conversations and to store records securely
- ensure resources are clean and their maintenance complies with infection-control principles
- provide toys and play materials promote cultural awareness, including the culture and heritage of Wales, and equal opportunities

Appendix 1 - Estyn's enhanced focus on reading

Why do we have an enhanced focus on reading?

Being able to read fluently:

- Improves a learner's life chances
- Supports learners to develop better emotional and mental well-being, social skills and secure relationships
- Significantly enhances communication skills by expanding vocabulary and boosting language proficiency
- Improves focus and concentration
- Enables learners to make better progress across all areas of the curriculum
- Develops imagination, creativity and empathy
- Improves analytical thinking skills

Research evidence shows that a lack of reading skills can be a main contributor to a life of hardship and often leads to an intergenerational cycle of underachievement and poverty. This lack of reading skills can have devastating impact on a person's life and is a key contributor to an intergenerational cycle of underachievement and crime. Those with low literacy skills are twice as likely to be unemployed, and workers with poor literacy earn on average 60% less than those with basic literacy skills. Over 50% of the adult prison population have reading skills below those of an 11-year-old.

Estyn wants to be part of the solution that breaks this cycle and recognises the need, through our work with all education providers, to prioritise improving the reading skills of all learners in Wales.

What we know

We know from our recent thematic and annual reports that there is excellent practice in teaching reading across all sectors, but not all education providers focus on improving learners' reading well enough.

We recognise that the best teaching and learning in reading can involve a range of methodologies and practices, with phonics as a key building block. However, we are starting to see a shift to phonics sometimes being introduced too early, before children have the necessary linguistic and language skills, they need to become fluent and effective readers.

We know that too many learners are not fluent, advanced readers by the time they leave school or further education. The best literacy provision integrates reading effectively with the development of learners'

listening, speaking and writing skills

What are we going to do?

As we move past the pandemic and life for most is beginning to return to normal, now is the time for every education provider from non-maintained nursery settings to schools, colleges and adult learning services to focus on improving the literacy levels of every learner so that together we can help break the cycle between low literacy skills and poverty. From September 2026 and for the next three years all inspection activity will have an enhanced focus on reading.

During the first year, we will gain a better understanding of how well non-maintained nursery settings develop a strong culture of reading. Through our inspection work, we will explore how effectively providers develop children's pre-reading skills holistically through play, exploration and rich experiences. Inspectors will consider how successfully settings enhance children's enjoyment of and engagement with books, stories, songs and rhymes. Where providers are working with parents to enhance children's pre-reading experiences, we will highlight any beneficial practice we find.

Estyn will be a key part of this improvement journey – evaluating what is working well through our inspection work and supporting providers to bring about the necessary improvements by publishing helpful resources. and the materials we produce

Reading - for learners - for Wales.