Rocking Horse Nursery SCIO
Day Care of Children

49 College Bounds
Aberdeen
AB24 3DY

Telephone: 01224 273 400

Type of inspection:
Unannounced

Completed on:
9 October 2025

Service provided by:
Rocking Horse Nursery SCIO

Service provider number:
SP2023000238

Service no:
CS2023000361

About the service

Rocking Horse Nursery SCIO Aberdeen operates from a purpose-built, environmentally-friendly building within the campus of the University of Aberdeen. It is registered to provide a care service to a maximum of 84 children not yet attending primary school at any one time:

- no more than 21 are aged under two years
- no more than 25 are aged two years to under three years
- no more than 63 are aged two years to those not yet attending primary school full time.

The outdoor space has been taken into account when agreeing the maximum number of children aged from three years. Children must have access to the outdoor space at all times.
All rooms are located on the ground floor. There is parking available and transport links very close by.

About the inspection

This was an unannounced inspection which took place on 6 and 7 October 2025 between 09:40 and 18:00. Feedback was provided on 9 October 2025. The inspection was carried out by two inspectors from the Care Inspectorate. To prepare for the inspection we reviewed information about this service. This included registration information, information submitted by the service, and intelligence gathered.

In making our evaluations of the service we:

- interacted with children using the service
- spoke with nine of their parents/carers
- spoke with staff and management
- received 18 completed questionnaires from parents and carers
- observed practice and daily experiences
- reviewed documents.

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

• Strong leadership, a motivated staff team and high levels of engagement from families had supported continuous improvement which led to high quality play and learning outcomes for the children.

• Diversity and inclusion were well promoted through multicultural resources, family representation, and cultural celebrations, supporting a welcoming and inclusive environment.

• Children enjoyed a variety of stimulating and exciting play and learning experiences supported by skilled staff and a rich learning environment both indoors and outdoors.

• Children experienced positive outcomes as a result of being supported by caring and nurturing staff who responded effectively to their individual needs.

• Strong, respectful relationships with families enhanced outcomes for children through daily engagement, organised events and collaborative partnerships that supported emotional security and personalised care.

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

Leadership	5 - Very Good
Children thrive and develop in quality spaces	5 - Very Good
Children play and learn	5 - Very Good
Children are supported to achieve	4 - Good

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

Leadership 5 - Very Good

We found significant strengths in aspects of the leadership and how these supported positive outcomes for children, therefore we evaluated this quality indicator as very good.

Leadership and management of staff and resources

The service demonstrated a strong commitment to inclusive and meaningful engagement with children, families, and staff in refreshing its vision, values, and aims (VVA). Parents reported feeling fully involved in the process, describing it as thorough and impactful. The manager provided clear evidence of how children's voices were captured, with key themes such as relationships and play experiences emerging and being thoughtfully embedded. The resulting framework - THINK (Teamwork, Happy, Include, Nurture, Kindness) - reflects a child centred ethos and had been adapted into a simplified version to ensure accessibility for all children. This collaborative approach has strengthened the shared understanding of the service's values and contributed to a cohesive and nurturing environment.

Leadership within the service was found to be highly effective, with the manager's strong commitment to continuous improvement motivating the team and driving positive change. Staff were confident in their roles and demonstrated a clear understanding of how their practice contributed to improved outcomes for children. Examples included enhancements to the lunchtime experience, enriched planning for learning, and increased opportunities for outdoor play.

The service has embedded a robust culture of self-evaluation at all levels. Families and children were actively encouraged to participate in this process, fostering trust and mutual respect. Feedback mechanisms such as 'Sway' updates, stay and play sessions, and MS Forms enabled families to share their views, which were consistently valued and acted upon. One parent told us the management team "actively listen and are always, always willing and striving to make improvements based on evidence and their understanding" and that the staff team "tirelessly strive to make the setting a great place for all." Parents described feeling well informed and connected to their child's experiences, with many highlighting the responsiveness of staff and the respectful, child-led nature of the provision.

All areas for improvement from the previous inspection had been addressed in a meaningful way. The comprehensive improvement plan was outcome focused and demonstrated clear progression, with next steps identified and tracked. This evidenced a strong commitment to continuous improvement and reflective practice.

Quality assurance processes were inclusive and transparent. The service shared progress with families through presentations and used recognised tools to support planning and evaluation. Staff training was targeted and responsive to identified needs, for example specific training on planning and infant care for baby room staff. Monitoring of key areas such as lunchtime interactions and planning for different age groups further supported quality improvement.
The service placed high value on relationships with families, offering multiple opportunities for engagement. Trustees held open sessions, and weekly updates from staff in the children's individual rooms provided a deep insight into children's experiences. Parents were invited to stay and play sessions and encouraged to provide feedback through surveys and forms. These efforts resulted in well informed families who felt their contributions were respected and valued.

Although no new staff had joined since the last inspection, discussions indicated that positive induction processes were in place. Staff retention was very high and staff consistently reported feeling well supported. This continuity of staff contributed to a consistent and nurturing environment for children.

The service had been working hard on embedding children's rights into their practice. Staff had identified training needs in relation to this through surveys, leading to targeted training delivered in September 2025. Children's rights were visible throughout the setting, including on wall displays and in floor books. The service used best practice documentation such as 'Realising the Ambition' to guide their rights based practice and support positive outcomes.

Children thrive and develop in quality spaces — 5 - Very Good

We found significant strengths in aspects of the environment provided and how these supported positive outcomes for children, therefore we evaluated this quality indicator as very good.

Children experience high quality spaces

The indoor and outdoor environments were welcoming, well-resourced, and thoughtfully maintained. Improvements were evident, particularly in the baby room, where new resources had been introduced to create a more nurturing and comfortable space. Furniture throughout the nursery was of good quality and in very good condition, contributing to a safe and inviting atmosphere.

Spaces were purposefully designed to support a wide range of developmental needs. Children had access to areas that encouraged curiosity, creativity, and problem-solving, as well as quieter zones for rest. For example, the construction area in the 3-5 room offered a variety of blocks and materials, enabling children to build models which were then proudly displayed with their names or photos. In the 2-3 room, the music station offered musical instruments alongside literacy prompts and staff-led learning questions. Art and craft stations were well stocked across the rooms, dressing-up areas provided imaginative play opportunities, and story corners featured soft furnishings and adult-sized seating to promote comfort and engagement.

While the environment was generally well-considered, further enhancements could include softer lighting such as fairy lights or lamps and an expansion of natural and loose parts materials. The variety and quantity of household items such as pans, cooking utensils and food packaging for role play areas was inconsistent across rooms and could be standardised to enrich play experiences.

Outdoor play was prioritised and well-integrated into daily routines. All children accessed outdoor spaces during the inspection, with some enjoying extended periods outside including enjoying snack. Parents spoke positively about the outdoor provision, particularly the walled garden. Community engagement was strong, with children participating in outings to local parks, gardens, and cultural venues, which enriched their learning and broadened their experiences.

Staff deployment was effective, ensuring children were consistently supervised. Communication between staff was clear and proactive, especially when transitioning between areas. Safety protocols were visible, such as children signing themselves in and out using photographs, supporting independence and awareness of personal safety. Entry to the nursery was secure, with visitors welcomed appropriately.

Cleanliness and hygiene were maintained to a high standard. Handwashing routines were embedded, and food preparation followed best practice. Nappy changing was conducted respectfully, offering moments of calm and connection.

Children were actively involved in shaping their environment. They chose resources independently, and staff supported this autonomy. A suggested improvement would be to introduce a visual catalogue of stored resources to enhance decision making.

Sustainability was embedded in outdoor learning, with children growing produce and learning to respect nature. Seasonal learning was evident across rooms, with creative displays showcasing children's engagement through sensory exploration and mark-making.
Diversity and inclusion were thoughtfully promoted. Displays reflected varied family structures, and resources included culturally diverse dolls and books. Staff celebrated cultural events, learned key phrases in children's home languages, and responded to family suggestions, supporting a sense of belonging and respect.

Children play and learn 5 - Very Good

We found significant strengths in aspects of the play and learning provided and how these supported positive outcomes for children, therefore we evaluated this quality indicator as very good.

Playing, learning and developing

Children experienced high levels of engagement across the nursery, supported by a responsive and reflective staff team who placed children's voices at the heart of their practice. Staff had identified this as a key development area and made strong progress in embedding child led approaches. Children's interests and emotions were reflected in the environment, showing a good understanding of individual preferences and developmental stages.

Children benefited from a wide range of learning experiences indoors, outdoors, and in the wider community. One parent told us about positive community experiences including "visiting the library and recent trip to the Arts Centre to see a show. During the Tall Ships they visited the library to see the ships from the top floor." Outings highlighted visits to other places including Seaton Park and the Cruickshank Botanical Gardens, offered meaningful opportunities for exploration and connection. These trips were well-planned and linked to children's interests, enhancing learning and curiosity. Parents spoke positively about outdoor experiences such as tree climbing and minibeast hunts, which supported physical development and peer relationships.

Literacy and numeracy were embedded in daily routines and play. Children were read to in small groups and individually, with staff using songs, rhymes, and conversation to support language development. Literacy rich environments included prompts and environmental print. There was scope to enhance this further, for example by adding maps, notebooks, and recipe books to play areas. Numeracy was promoted through snack routines, counting games, and mathematical language like "full," "empty," "big," and "little." A parent told us "there seems to be different activities every day of the week. Water play, shaving foam, play dough, different games. My child is very into reading and they take time to read with her and books are always available.....we are always very impressed at how they introduce STEM to 1/ 2 year olds. We always hear and see photos of the children 'making their mark' through paint, pencils, water and sticks so many different ways."

Health and wellbeing were nurtured through consistent routines and emotionally supportive interactions. Children developed emotional literacy through books and resources, and family photos helped foster belonging. Staff supported confidence and resilience through turn-taking games and inclusive group discussions. Activities like the autumn treasure bag invited children to speak about and show what they had found, including leaves and pine cones, to a small group of their friends. This helped build confidence in speaking and listening. Children enjoyed planting activities and spoke confidently about the process. Eating the vegetables they had grown added meaning to their learning.

Staff across all rooms showed strong commitment to professional development. In the 0-2 room, targeted training led to improved outcomes. Treasure boxes and small group explorations created calm, focused spaces for babies. Staff used 'joyful moments' and 'fascinations' to enhance interactions and inform planning.

Interactions were consistently warm and purposeful. Observations showed children leading their play, with staff scaffolding learning and promoting social connections. Staff supported children to engage with peers, building confidence and inclusion.

Planning and assessment were child-centred and based on ongoing observations. Mind maps and interactive learning diary (ILD) records captured children's interests and progress. Parents could see how their child's voice shaped learning. Staff discussions and wall displays reflected responsive and intentional planning.

Overall, children's engagement was well supported through skilled staff interactions, rich environments, and a strong commitment to child led practice, resulting in positive outcomes across all areas of play, learning, and development.

Children are supported to achieve 4 - Good

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

Nurturing care and support

Children experienced warm, responsive care that supported their emotional wellbeing and development. Staff interactions were consistently nurturing, enabling children to feel secure and build trusting relationships. Parent and carers told us that very positive relationships with staff was a key strength of the service. One parent/carer told us that "the staff are extremely welcoming and caring" and another described them as "lovely, friendly, passionate practitioners." Parents shared examples of sensitive support during challenging times, including bereavement and extended parental absence, which helped children feel safe and understood.

Transitions were carefully planned and tailored to individual needs. One parent described feeling anxious about leaving their child for the first time, but was reassured through supportive settling in sessions. This approach helped both parent and child develop confidence in the nursery environment. Staff demonstrated a very good understanding of children's backgrounds. One parent/carer we spoke with highlighted a particularly personalised transition for their child, resulting in a settled and positive start.

Children benefited from calm, well-organised spaces that supported different needs. Quiet areas such as story corners allowed for rest or small group play. Lunchtime routines were nurturing and unhurried, with staff sitting alongside children and engaging meaningfully. Improvements were noted following feedback, including reduced noise levels which supported greater opportunities for meaningful conversation and increased opportunities for independence through self-serving.

Sleep routines were responsive and child-centred. Staff adapted approaches to suit individual preferences, such as stroking backs or lying alongside the child until they fell asleep. Safe sleeping practices were observed, and the introduction of sleep sheets supported consistency. Staff were aware of the importance of regular checks, though formalising this process would strengthen practice.

Medication management was generally effective; however, two records concerning one child lacked documentation confirming that parents had been informed about antihistamine administration. This omission posed a potential risk of the child receiving too much medication. The manager confirmed that parents are always contacted prior to administering medication and provided supporting evidence. However, the absence of a written entry in the medication record undermined the reliability of this process. While monthly medication care plan reviews took place as part of the service's auding processes, daily medication records were not included. This resulted in these omissions going unnoticed. In response, the management team committed to enhancing their auditing procedures to include a specific focus on medication administration documentation. They also confirmed that further discussions would be held with staff responsible for administering medication to reinforce best practice (see area for improvement 1).

Personal planning was a key strength. Parents felt actively involved in developing and reviewing plans, which were thorough and responsive to children's evolving needs. Induction forms were consistent across rooms and included detailed personal preferences. Staff used 'quick glance' forms and clear strategies to support emotional wellbeing, with strong evidence of alignment between home and nursery practices.

Very strong and positive relationships with families were a key strength of the service and significantly enhanced outcomes for children. Parents actively contributed to service development and were deeply involved in their child's learning. Staff maintained warm, respectful daily interactions and were consistently available. Emotional security was supported through visible family connections and inclusive planning. Diverse family structures were acknowledged, and parents were well informed about progress. These collaborative partnerships fostered a nurturing environment, strengthened transitions, and ensured care was tailored to individual needs and preferences.

Areas for improvement

1. To ensure children's safety and wellbeing the provider must ensure that systems for recording and communicating medication administration are robust, clear, and consistently followed at all times.

This is to ensure that care and support is consistent with Health and Social Care Standards (HSCS) which state that:
'Any treatment or intervention that I experience is safe and effective' (HSCS 1.24).

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 help ensure children are provided with nurturing support that meets their care needs and emotional wellbeing, the manager and staff should ensure children's personal plans contain clear and easy to understand strategies and staff use this information to effectively support them.

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 area for improvement was made on 2 October 2024.

Action taken since then
Personal plans had been further developed since the last inspection. Clear strategies were in place which helped to support personalised and consistent care and support. Staff talked knowledgeably about individual needs and this was reflected in the personal plans we viewed.

This area for improvement was found to have been met.

Previous area for improvement 2

To help keep children safe and promote their enjoyment of healthy eating and drinking, the manager and staff should improve mealtime experiences. This should include, but not be limited to, effective staff supervision and help when eating and limiting the time spent seated and waiting for lunch to be served.

This is to ensure that care and support is consistent with the Health and Social Care Standards (HSCS) which state that:
'If I need help with eating and drinking, this is carried out in a dignified way and my personal preferences are respected' (HSCS 1.34).

This area for improvement was made on 2 October 2024.

Action taken since then
Mealtime experiences had been improved since the last inspection. Children received their lunch quickly after being seated and were consistently well supported by caring and responsive staff. In one room the lunch experiences was a little noisy and busy which did impact negatively on conversation. Changes made by staff on the second day of the inspection ensured a more relaxed and engaging lunchtime experience.

This area for improvement was found to have been met.

Previous area for improvement 3

To support children's learning and development, the manager and staff should ensure children experience high quality play and learning relevant to their age and stage of development. This should include, but not

be limited to, ensuring staff are knowledgeable and trained in using effective questioning to scaffold learning and extend children's thinking.

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 have fun as I develop my skills in understanding, thinking, investigation, and problem solving, including through imaginative play and storytelling' (HSCS 1.30).

This area for improvement was made on 2 October 2024.

Action taken since then

Staff had undertaken relevant training since the last inspection and used their learning confidently and consistently to support high quality play and learning for the children.

This area for improvement was found to have been met.

Previous area for improvement 4

To keep children safe, well, and free from infection, the provider and manager should ensure the building and garden are well maintained.

This is to ensure that care and support is consistent with the Health and Social Care Standards (HSCS) which state that:
'I experience an environment that is well looked after with clean, tidy, and well maintained premises, furnishings, and equipment' (HSCS 5.24).

This area for improvement was made on 2 October 2024.

Action taken since then

All areas of the nursery indoors and outdoors were found to be well maintained. Concerns noted at the last inspection had been actioned very promptly and systems put in place to ensure a high standard of environment was sustained.

This area for improvement was found to have been met.

Previous area for improvement 5

To support children's comfort, learning, and development, the provider and manager should ensure the environment offers children a range of rich stimulating play resources within a cosy and comfortable environment.

This is to ensure that care and support is consistent with the Health and Social Care Standards (HSCS) which state that:
'I am able to access a range of good quality equipment and furnishings to meet my needs, wishes, and choices' (HSCS 5.23).

This area for improvement was made on 2 October 2025.

Action taken since then

The environment had continued to be developed since the last inspection. All spaces were inviting and offered positive opportunities for play and learning. Some new resources had been purchased for the 0-2

room to make it a more cosy and comfortable environment and this had a positive impact. It could be developed further, however and consideration be given to softer lighting.

This area for improvement was found to have been met.

Previous area for improvement 6

To support improvement to the service and ensure good outcomes for children, the manager should ensure self evaluation and quality assurance of the service are embedded in practice and involve all stakeholders to bring about positive changes and sustained improvement.

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 area for improvement was made on 2 October 2024.

Action taken since then

Self evaluation and quality assurance was now being undertaken at a high standard and had led to significant improvements in relation to children's outcomes. The team were committed to continuous improvement having made the links between changes made and the positive impact.

This area for improvement was found to have 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

Leadership	5 - Very Good
Leadership and management of staff and resources	5 - Very Good

Children thrive and develop in quality spaces	5 - Very Good
Children experience high quality spaces	5 - Very Good

Children play and learn	5 - Very Good
Playing, learning and developing	5 - Very Good

Children are supported to achieve	4 - Good
Nurturing care and support	4 - Good

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