

Newbattle Forest Kindergarten Day Care of Children

Newbattle Abbey College
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Type of inspection:
Unannounced

Completed on:
11 December 2025

Service provided by:
City of Edinburgh Council

Service provider number:
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Service no:
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About the service

Newbattle Forest Kindergarten provides care for a maximum of 15 children at any one time aged between three years and primary school entry.

The manager of the service is also the manager of Bonaly Forest Kindergarten and Hawkhill Forest Kindergarten.

The service is provided by City of Edinburgh Council and located in the grounds of Newbattle Abbey college. Children are cared for in a forest base site within a woodland area. They have access to a playroom and toilet within the gate house that has direct access to a rear garden. This area is used during adverse weather conditions.

About the inspection

This was an unannounced inspection which took place on 8 December 2025 between 09:00 and 16:00. Two inspectors carried out the inspection.

To prepare for the inspection we reviewed information about this service. This included, registration information, information submitted by the service and intelligence gathered since registration.

In making our evaluations of the service we:

- spoke with children using the service
- considered feedback from three families through an online questionnaire
- considered feedback from six staff through an online questionnaire
- observed practice and daily life
- reviewed documents relating to the care of children and the management of the service.

As part of this inspection, we undertook a focus area. We have gathered specific information to help us understand more about how service supports 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.

As part of our inspections, we assess core assurances. Core assurances are checks we make to ensure children are safe, the physical environment is well maintained and that a service is operating legally. At the time of this inspection, no improvements were identified relating to core assurances.

Key messages

- Staff were consistent in their sensitive and nurturing approaches to the children and their individual needs, contributing to a sense of security and wellbeing.
- The children experienced organic learning from their encounters with the natural environment which enabled them to explore, be curious and engaged.
- Quality assurance and self-evaluation informed planned improvements which developed positive outcomes for children and families.
- Personal plans informed practice and promoted children's wellbeing.
- Children's nutritional needs were met and children experienced calm, unhurried and social outdoor mealtimes.
- The service prioritised building strong connections with 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

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	5 - Very Good

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

Leadership 5 - Very Good

We found major strengths in this aspect of the setting's work and identified very few areas for improvement, therefore we evaluated this quality indicator as very good.

Quality indicator: Leadership and management of staff and resources

The service achieved a shared vision that delivered high-quality experiences for children, families, and partners. The service gathered feedback over a two-year period from families and staff, and this informed the development of the 'Forest Kindergarten way'. This supported creating a learning environment that was immersed in nature and embedded child-centred, play-based opportunities. This approach strengthened children's curiosity, resilience, and sense of responsibility. The clear handbook supported staff and families to understand and adopt the vision and values, ensuring consistency and collective ownership. By providing transport, the service removed barriers to forest access, increasing equity and inclusion for all children. These actions embedded respect and support for every child and ensured the Forest Kindergarten vision was consistently implemented in practice.

The leadership team developed a shared approach to quality assurance audits and used evidence effectively to evaluate provision and drive improvements. Professional discussions ensured audit actions were implemented, strengthening practice and delivering positive outcomes for children and families. An audit of accident and incident reports was carried out monthly. However, we identified that some recent reports were not acknowledged by families. While valid reasons were provided, the service should record how information was shared and obtain signatures promptly to ensure robust child safety procedures.

Views of families and staff were central to the self-evaluation process, with questionnaires used to gather data. The service reflected effectively during regular team meetings and used these reflections to drive positive change. One staff told us, "In our staff meetings we are valued to contribute and learn on how we can improve our practices". Findings informed the development of the Service Quality Improvement Plan (SQIP), ensuring self-evaluation led to meaningful improvements. Staff told us, "We haven't done much self-evaluation yet this term besides the SQIP." Moving forward, the service should implement more regular focused self-evaluation linked to best practice guidance, such as the Quality Improvement Framework for Early Learning and Childcare and involve children alongside families and staff in the self evaluation process.

The service implemented and regularly reviewed their improvement plan, ensuring positive outcomes for children and families. Staff were motivated, understood priorities, and reported benefits from changes. Trauma and child protection training strengthened safeguarding confidence. Improved communication and planning enhanced consistency and enriched children's experiences. Increased parental engagement through consultations and events built stronger relationships and involvement in learning. Meaningful initiatives, such as family campfire celebrations, created special connections. These actions demonstrated that planned improvements delivered measurable benefits for children and families.

The service implemented structured induction programmes for new staff, including checklists and links to essential policies and training. Staff confirmed they received induction and mentoring support, which strengthened their confidence and understanding. We discussed with leaders they should ensure induction was paced appropriately, allowing time for full comprehension. Ongoing support through regular support meetings and annual appraisals promoted professional growth and wellbeing. Staff reported feeling valued and supported and some staff commented, "I haven't been with this team for that long but so far I feel

supported with any issues I have faced" and "Our head of centre and senior are kind, responsive and I can trust them in difficult times". These actions built staff confidence, improved practice, and ensured positive experiences for children and families.

Children thrive and develop in quality spaces 5 - Very Good

We found major strengths in this aspect of the setting's work and identified very few areas for improvement; therefore we evaluated this quality indicator as very good.

Quality indicator: Children experience high quality spaces

The service operated within the grounds of Newbattle Abbey College, offering children access to a large natural forest base site. A small indoor environment was accessible at the gatehouse during extreme weather or colder periods. The gatehouse provided a warm playroom with open access to a rear garden, a toilet and staff facilities.

Children benefited from a welcoming outdoor forest environment that provided regular contact with nature and promoted responsibility and sustainability. Children explored nature and played with a wide variety of natural, open-ended resources. Defined areas in the forest for mealtimes, toilets, drawing, and storytelling supported continuity and security. Tarpaulin sheltered spaces enabled activities in all weathers, while the grounds offered opportunities for games and adventures. Although children had built a den with sticks we asked the service to consider creating spaces such as a cosy den for children to access if they wished to spend time alone or for self-regulation.

The service made very good use of resources to create a motivating, natural environment where children played together and explored. Families told us, "Being outside in the forest has been so beneficial for my child's health and wellbeing. Not only have they become more confident and independent they are developing a wonderful relationship with the outdoors and the wonders of nature" and "The freedom & independence gained from their learning of the forest & learning how to keep themselves & others safe. Following the forest rules". The team worked hard to develop rich, stimulating spaces that supported children's learning and development.

In the forest the service provided an outdoor toilet within a tent, positioned to ensure privacy. Although no children required nappy changing, an additional toilet/changing tent was available. Children's personal care needs were met with dignity and respect. Hygiene practices were consistently followed. Staff promoted handwashing at key times and ensured warm water for handwashing was available throughout sessions. Personal protective equipment, including gloves and aprons, supported safe infection prevention and control. We asked the service to maintain cleanliness and reduce clutter in the gatehouse toilet to uphold dignity and hygiene.

Comprehensive risk assessments were in place to ensure children's safety. Staff carried out daily site checks and regular risk-benefit assessments, maintaining a secure environment while allowing challenge and exploration. Children were involved in assessing risk throughout sessions. The service maintained a strong partnership with Newbattle Abbey College, who responded promptly to maintenance requests for the forest and gatehouse areas.

A clear visual boundary supported safety within the forest base site. Staff also accessed a large grass area near a river, which was high and fast-flowing on the day of inspection due to rainfall. Risks were reduced through staff positioning, robust risk assessments, and water safety training. Future plans to relocate the

base site away from the river were shared. Adequate staffing ensured effective supervision, and regular 'magic number' head counts were carried out. The service had a clear lost child policy, however, proximity to the river required stronger visual boundaries to support children in staying safe.

Children were actively involved in shaping their environment through floorbooks and mind maps, promoting ownership and responsibility. The "coming together agreement" and simplified forest framework supported understanding of expectations within the forest. Wellbeing characters were used to help children understand concepts such as safety. During adventures, staff encouraged children to assess their surroundings and decide if it was safe to climb. With plans to relocate their base site within the forest the service should continue to consult children and gather their views to influence decision making. This would strengthen participation and ensure environments continue to reflect children's needs and preferences.

Children play and learn 5 - Very Good

We found major strengths in this aspect of the setting's work and identified very few areas for improvement, therefore we evaluated this quality indicator as very good.

Quality indicator: Playing, learning and developing

Children at Newbattle Forest Kindergarten explored their environment with energy and purpose. They listened to the sounds of nature, hunted for bugs, and searched for signs of animal life. These experiences sparked curiosity and encouraged children to ask questions. Staff responded with open-ended prompts that extended thinking and inspired deeper exploration. Throughout the day, children climbed, balanced, and moved freely, developing creativity, coordination, and an understanding of risk.

The setting provided a wide range of natural resources and loose parts that supported imaginative play. These materials allowed children to create, experiment, and problem-solve. Many confidently recalled previous experiences, sharing stories of what they had learned. This showed that their learning was meaningful and connected to real-world understanding. Families praised these opportunities, noting how outdoor experiences strengthened imagination and built knowledge, evidencing that play experiences were purposeful and contributed to holistic development.

Interactions were calm, respectful, and adapted to individual needs. Staff actively empowered children to lead their play and learning. They asked thoughtful questions, wondered aloud, and explained ideas to sustain children's thinking. Staff guided curiosity gently, encouraging children to explore and solve problems independently. Conversations flowed naturally, with children discussing the wider world around them. When questions arose, staff used technology and their knowledge of nature to provide answers and deepen understanding. As a result, children demonstrated increased confidence, critical thinking, and the ability to make connections in their learning.

Staff modelled positive behaviours and worked alongside children to nurture respect for animals and wildlife. One parent described the provision as "wonderful," sharing that "My son is so engaged by the attentive staff and the brilliant activities and games they plan. My son feels included and loves his forest teachers and friends. He is learning so much" As a result, children developed a deeper understanding of nature, demonstrated empathy towards living things, and engaged in purposeful play that promoted curiosity and responsibility

The manager and staff have recently adapted planning methods to make learning more meaningful and provide opportunities for in-depth learning. They evaluated experiences, identified outcomes, and

considered improvements. These approaches ensured children were supported to progress and achieve. Planning was responsive and rooted in children's interests. Staff observed and acted in the moment, creating experiences that reflected what children loved. For example, when a child enjoyed mixing in the mud kitchen, staff organized a campfire soup activity to extend that interest. As a result, children experienced breadth, depth, and challenge in their play, developed problem-solving skills, and demonstrated sustained engagement.

Throughout the day numeracy opportunities were supported by adults. Children counted, used finger patterns, and discussed weather and seasons. Staff spoke of nature initiatives where tally sheets for bee and bird counts were introduced. Literacy opportunities were organically embedded into the resources, interactions and experiences of the children. There were opportunities for children to develop these literacy skills without adult engagement as well as with support. Stories, songs, mark-making, and visual timetables were woven into play. Moving forward, the team aims to integrate numeracy as seamlessly as literacy.

Staff spoke passionately about the benefits they can see for the children coming to the Forest. They described the progress they have seen for children with their emotional development and showed a great understanding of the benefits their children get from this environment and the experiences. Parents had commented on observations and stories and shared through feedback that they are kept up to date with the children's experiences. They are happy with the progression of their children and the support they receive. Learning and development were assessed through reflection and recorded online, with next steps clearly outlined. Audits highlighted a need for consistency in observations, which the manager shared they have already begun working on.

Children are supported to achieve 5 - Very Good

We found major strengths in this aspect of the setting's work and identified very few areas for improvement; therefore we evaluated this quality indicator as very good.

Quality indicator: Nurturing care and support

Staff consistently demonstrated warm, nurturing relationships that helped children feel safe, secure, and respected. One family told us, "All of the staff are very friendly, helpful and nurturing. They know my child very well and have supported them greatly since they started at the forest". Staff responded sensitively to children's cues and preferences, supporting wellbeing and choice. We observed nurturing practices such as encouraging appropriate clothing for warmth and offering warm blankets as alternatives demonstrating staff's commitment to supporting choice whilst ensuring wellbeing.

Transitions into the forest were well planned and supported, helping children feel secure and confident. The bus journey to the forest became a positive learning experience. Children expressed enjoyment and shared a fondness of drivers and described singing songs together on the bus. Staff used a visual board at the bus collection point so children were informed on who was waiting in the woods each day, reducing anxiety and promoting a sense of belonging.

There were opportunities for rest and relaxation in the forest. Children could relax in hammocks or designated story areas, with sleeping bags and blankets available. A 'warm bag' system was used to keep blankets warm, ensuring comfort during colder weather. Although no children slept during the visit staff shared safer sleep checks were in place to maintain children's safety and wellbeing.

Safeguarding was identified as an improvement priority by the service following self-evaluation. The

manager recognised gaps in practice and took decisive action to strengthen procedures. All staff completed trauma-informed practice and child protection training and revisited their roles and codes of practice. As a result, staff had increased confidence and awareness of their responsibilities in safeguarding.

There were no medication needs or allergies present during the inspection. However, medication forms were in place and aligned with best practice to ensure safe administration if required. The service had generic consent for 'first aid and product consent' within personal plans. We advised the service to update consent to include specific products, such as the Anthisan cream used for nettle stings, and to follow medication permissions and records when administering these. This would maintain safe practice and reassure families about children's health and wellbeing.

Children experienced calm, unhurried, and social outdoor mealtimes. Children's nutritional needs were met through warm vegetarian meals prepared by a nearby school. Staff sat with children to support social interaction, provide assistance, and ensure safety. Families confirmed staff were responsive to individual needs and commented, "My child can struggle with eating different foods at meal times but staff will always make sure to provide something they will eat and will encourage them to try new foods". Staff promoted portion awareness to ensure fairness and reduce waste and shared that alternative options were provided if a child did not eat their meal. Children's independence was encouraged as they served themselves using tongs, poured soup, and washed dishes. As a result, mealtimes met nutritional needs and supported social development and independence.

Personal plans informed practice and promoted children's wellbeing. Plans were developed in partnership with families using wellbeing indicators to capture needs, interests, and preferences. Families confirmed they were fully involved in creating and reviewing plans. One family commented, "The staff at the forest have fully supported my child to overcome new challenges and transitions that have been happening in their life". Staff introduced a wellbeing wheel to help children reflect and identify next steps. Parent consultations and regular updates supported ongoing collaboration. While most personal plans were clear, some overviews lacked detail and some wellbeing chronologies required revisiting. Reviews of personal plans were recorded, but some exceeded the six-month timeframe. Quality assurance identified this and we asked the service to ensure reviews occur at least every six months as per legislation.

The service prioritised building strong connections with families as part of its improvement plan. Barriers to participation were removed by providing transport for families to attend events, including a Christmas forest session and birthday celebrations. Regular parent consultations, newsletters, app updates, and informal conversations kept families informed and involved. Families confirmed positive relationships and told us, "The minibus drop offs and pick-ups are a great chance to chat to staff. The learning journal updates are great. I like that staff are contactable by text message and always get back promptly". Staff demonstrated commitment to inclusive practice and responsive communication. Families consistently felt welcomed, informed, and involved in their child's learning and care. Stronger partnerships supported children's wellbeing and smooth transitions.

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	5 - Very Good
Nurturing care and support	5 - Very Good

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