

Playden Nursery Day Care of Children

40 Barrock Street
Thurso
KW14 7DG

Telephone: 01847896430

Type of inspection:
Unannounced

Completed on:
4 February 2026

Service provided by:
Playden Nursery SCIO

Service provider number:
SP2024000911

Service no:
CS2024000151

About the service

Playden Nursery is registered to provide a day care of children service to a maximum of 20 children, from the age of two years to those not yet attending primary school. The nursery operates term time only.

Playden Nursery is located within the town of Thurso, Caithness. The service operates from a purpose-built nursery building with an entrance area, toilets, office, kitchen area and two playrooms. They also have an enclosed garden with an outdoor shelter. A small wild garden has been developed to extend the range of outdoor experiences for the children.

The nursery works in partnership with The Highland Council to provide funded early learning and childcare.

About the inspection

This was an unannounced inspection which took place on 3 and 4 February 2026. Inspection feedback was given to the provider, manager and a representative from the local authority on 4 February 2026. 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 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
- reviewed online feedback from four families.

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.

During this inspection we 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.

At the time of the inspection there were 11 children in attendance.

Key messages

- Children experienced warm, nurturing relationships that supported them to feel safe, settled and confident.
- Strong relationships with families contributed to a welcoming and inclusive environment.
- Personal planning was not consistently effective in meeting the needs of all children.
- Children benefitted from a rich and stimulating environment, supporting their learning and development.
- Planning, observation and assessment processes were at an early stage of development and needed further work.
- Leadership was effective and contributed positively to children's experiences.

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

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|-----------------------------------|----------|
| Leadership | 4 - Good |
| Children play and learn | 4 - Good |
| Children are supported to achieve | 4 - Good |

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

Leadership 4 - Good

We evaluated this quality indicator as good, where there were important strengths within the setting's work and some aspects which could benefit from improvement.

Quality Indicator: Leadership and management of staff and resources

The service's vision, values and aims clearly reflected its commitment to kindness, nurture and respect. These principles were well embedded in practice and were evident throughout the nursery. Staff interactions consistently demonstrated these values, contributing to a warm, respectful atmosphere where children felt secure, valued and supported.

Leadership was effective and contributed positively to children's experiences. The service benefitted from a committed leader who fostered an ethos of support and a clear focus on children's wellbeing. The manager was visible, approachable, and actively involved in the day-to-day life of the setting, promoting continuity and shared expectations across the team.

A culture of reflection and continuous learning contributed to ongoing improvements in children's experiences. Staff and families were encouraged to participate in self evaluation and improvement planning. This process was well led, with clear, child centred priorities that were achievable and regularly reviewed. To strengthen this further, some improvement actions would benefit from being more clearly defined to support accountability and consistent progress.

The service actively sought and used staff and parent feedback, promoting shared ownership of improvement and contributing to positive changes. This responsive approach to quality assurance supported enhancements to family engagement, resources, and transitions. These had a positive impact on children's outcomes. One parent commented, "Playden ensure that parents are involved in decision making and often ask for parental involvement in changes."

Staff were supported to take on leadership roles, which built confidence and strengthened the quality of provision. Staff reflected on how spaces met children's needs and implemented improvements based on observations and best practice. As a result, children experienced a well organised, purposeful environment that was responsive to their interests.

Support and supervision systems contributed to developing staff practice. Regular opportunities for reflection allowed staff to consider their strengths and next steps. Feedback from monitoring was shared informally and was beginning to influence practice positively. There is scope to develop these processes further, so they more effectively drive continuous improvement and help staff embed learning that strengthens children's outcomes.

A positive and well structured induction supported new staff to feel confident, welcomed and well prepared for their role. The induction process introduced staff to the service's values, routines and expectations. Opportunities to shadow experienced colleagues and reflect on practice promoted consistency and supported professional growth. As a result, new staff were able to build effective relationships, feel part of the team, and contribute meaningfully to children's care and learning from an early stage.

Children play and learn 4 - Good

We evaluated this quality indicator as good, where there were important strengths within the setting's work and some aspects which could benefit from improvement.

Quality Indicator: Playing, learning and developing

Children experienced a child led environment that supported their confidence, independence and engagement. They moved freely around the nursery, following their interests. This promoted creativity, problem solving and exploratory learning. On the first morning, access to outdoor play was delayed due to staffing arrangements. This limited opportunities for some children to engage in active, outdoor learning. However, this improved significantly the following day, enabling children to access the outdoor area more freely. This meant they benefited from a better balance of indoor and outdoor experiences.

Children benefitted from a rich and stimulating environment, supporting their learning and development. Resources were engaging and appropriately challenging, with staff carefully considering children's ages and stages of development. The use of real life materials, such as herbs and natural objects for playdough, enhanced sensory exploration and creativity. Visual support aids were used effectively to help children communicate during play and snack times. This promoted inclusion and supported children's independence.

Play based approaches effectively supported children's early literacy and numeracy development. Messy and sensory experiences helped children gain confidence in mark making and encouraged emerging writing skills. We observed positive examples of early literacy and numeracy being explored through play, such as using letters in moon sand and noticing numbers within the environment. To further extend children's learning and understanding, there was scope for staff to incorporate these concepts more intentionally into conversations.

Staff were consistently warm, calm, and caring. They joined children at their level, helping them feel secure and understood. Most staff responded sensitively to children's needs. For example, when one child found it hard to settle, a staff member took a small group to the water tray, allowing them to choose colours and materials to explore. On occasion, staff missed children's cues for support when settling into play. This led to missed opportunities to guide and support their engagement. Strengthening consistency in recognising and responding to these cues would further enhance children's confidence and participation in play.

Planning, observation and assessment processes were at an early stage of development, which limited their effectiveness in supporting children's progress. While staff were beginning to capture children's experiences, some observations focused too heavily on describing play rather than identifying the specific learning taking place. As a result, next steps were not always clear or used to inform purposeful planning. The manager and staff were aware of these gaps and were taking steps to address them to ensure children's learning is monitored and extended more consistently.

Children are supported to achieve 4 - Good

We evaluated this quality indicator as good, where there were important strengths within the setting's work and some aspects which could benefit from improvement.

Quality Indicator: Nurturing care and support

Children experienced warm, nurturing relationships which supported their emotional wellbeing. Staff consistently used calm, gentle tones and interacted with children in a kind and supportive way.

As a result, children appeared settled, confident and secure within the setting. Parents and children spoke very positively about staff, describing them as "friendly and caring," "extremely helpful," and "really approachable."

Staff were responsive to children's individual needs, helping them feel valued and understood. They were generally skilled in recognising cues and offering timely comfort and reassurance. Staff demonstrated good knowledge of children's routines, preferences and care needs, which enabled them to provide nurturing and personalised interactions. However, inconsistencies in written personal plans meant that key strategies were not always clearly recorded, and on a few occasions, children did not receive support at the right time. This had the potential to compromise children's continuity of care and their overall wellbeing.

The service had developed positive partnerships with some external agencies, helping them to implement effective strategies to support individual children. There was scope to build on this good practice by strengthening wider multi agency involvement to ensure all children receive well-coordinated support.

Children's independence was well supported during mealtimes. Opportunities such as self serving and pouring drinks helped build autonomy and confidence. Mealtimes were generally calm and unhurried, giving children time to eat comfortably. Inconsistencies in practice meant some mealtimes offered fewer opportunities for social interaction and conversation. At times, routines became task focused, reducing the potential for relationship building and rich learning experiences.

The service fostered positive relationships with families, helping create a welcoming and inclusive environment. Staff used a range of communication tools, including an online platform, to share information effectively. Family engagement was promoted through events such as open days, helping parents feel connected and valued. One parent commented, "It's a very welcoming and family feel service."

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

Requirements

Requirement 1

By 31 January 2025, the provider must ensure that children are safe and protected. In order to achieve this the provider must ensure that effective processes are in place to ensure employees are recruited in a safe manner in line with best practice.

This is in order to comply with regulation 9 fitness of employees of The Social Care and Social Work Improvement Scotland (Requirements for Care Services) Regulations 2011 (SSI 2011/210). (Requirements for Care Services) Regulations 2011, SSI 2011/210.

This is in order to ensure that care and support is consistent with the Health and Social Care Standards, which state that: 'I am confident that people who support me have been appropriately and safely recruited' (HSCS 4.24)

This requirement was made on 16 January 2025.

Action taken on previous requirement

Effective processes were now in place to ensure employees were recruited in a safe manner, in line with best practice. These processes were applied consistently, ensuring only suitable and appropriately vetted individuals were employed. As a result, children's safety and wellbeing was better protected.

Met - within timescales

Complaints

Please see Care Inspectorate website (www.careinspectorate.com) for details of complaints about the service which have been upheld.

Detailed evaluations

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| Leadership | 4 - Good |
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| Children play and learn | 4 - Good |
| Playing, learning and developing | 4 - Good |
| Children are supported to achieve | 4 - Good |
| Nurturing care and support | 4 - Good |

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