

# Queensferry Forest Kindergarten Day Care of Children

The Vat Run  
Hopetoun Road  
South Queensferry  
EH30 9SQ

Telephone: 01312002000

**Type of inspection:**  
Unannounced

**Completed on:**  
6 March 2026

**Service provided by:**  
City of Edinburgh Council

**Service provider number:**  
SP2003002576

**Service no:**  
CS2023000101

## About the service

Queensferry Forest Kindergarten is registered to provide an early learning and childcare service to a maximum of 15 children aged between three years and primary school entry at any one time.

The manager is also the manager of Lauriston Castle Forest Kindergarten, Cammo Forest Kindergarten and Corstorphine Hill Forest Kindergarten.

The service is located at the Vat Run just off Hopetoun Road, underneath the Forth Road Bridge. Children have access to a designated base camp as well as open access to the surrounding areas, including regular trips to the pond, the waterfront at Hawes Pier, and regular trips into the local community and library. The library also serves as a contingency plan for any adverse weather.

A variety of temporary tarpaulin shelters are set up around the camp. This enables children to seek shelter when they choose, and gives a cosy and welcoming feel. Toilet tents are set up within the play areas and protect children's privacy and dignity.

The service is close to transport links, nurseries, schools, and local amenities.

## About the inspection

This was an unannounced inspection which took place on 02 March 2026 between the hours of 08:45 and 16:15. We returned on 03 March 2026 between the hours of 08:35 and 16:00 to complete the inspection. The inspection was carried out by one inspector 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 and two of their families
- reviewed feedback from an online form from seven families
- observed practice, daily routines and children's experiences
- spoke with staff and management
- reviewed documents relating to children's care and development, and the management of the service.

As part of our inspections, we assess core assurances. Core assurances are checks we make to ensure that 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.

As part of this inspection, we undertook a focus area. 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.

## Key messages

- A clear and aspirational vision shaped every decision, was lived by children, staff and families, and drove continuous improvement.
- Rigorous and collaborative self-evaluation ensured consistently high-quality play and learning, with improvement work that was purposeful, well evidenced and sustained.
- Leadership was confidently shared across the team, with every staff member owning meaningful aspects of improvement through individual plans and reflective practice.
- Children experienced inspiring, safe and adventurous spaces that were well used, enabling confident, capable and environmentally aware learners.
- Children led rich, creative and challenging learning that reflected their ideas, questions and interests, resulting in authentic, meaningful inquiry.
- Planning and assessment were responsive, coherent and purposeful, driving consistently high outcomes and strong progress for all children.
- Children showed high levels of empathy, security and independence because they experienced warm, nurturing relationships and care that was deeply attuned to their needs.

## 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	6 - Excellent
Children thrive and develop in quality spaces	5 - Very Good
Children play and learn	6 - Excellent
Children are supported to achieve	5 - Very Good

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

**Leadership** 6 - Excellent**Quality indicator: Leadership and management of staff and resources**

We evaluated this key question as excellent where performance was sector leading with outstandingly high outcomes for children.

The setting had a clear, shared and distinctive vision and values based on connection, nature, fun, nurture and respect. The vision was lived every day and was visible in how children behaved, how staff made decisions and how families described their children's experiences. For example, when children noticed newly sprouting daffodils, they chose to protect them using stones they had painted yellow because they were worried, they might be stood on during play. This showed nurture, respect and connection to nature had been internalised as part of their daily lives. Families described similar behaviours at home, such as children rescuing insects or caring for small areas of woodland. This showed that these values extended well beyond the setting with children raising awareness within their community.

The vision, values and aims was encouraging children's independent thinking. For example, children led their own risk assessments throughout the day. A formal one was conducted after lunch, where they identified hazards and explained these to the group, and then decided what actions to take. This showed not only their ability to balance safety with environmental stewardship but also the early development of curious, responsible young citizens.

Leaders had systematically taken a learning approach from previous inspections and built a confident, motivated team who understood improvement priorities and why they mattered. This was because improvement was genuinely distributed across the team, and flowed from their vision and values. It was sector leading because each staff member held an individual improvement plan and used it to plan, bring ideas and reflect on their practice in real time. Staff brought evidence of their impact to planning and to 1:1 meetings and could describe how their actions improved outcomes for children. Staff described this shift as "transformational", showing how reflective practice had strengthened. In some areas, staff said, "It's like a light has come on, I'm much more focused on outcomes now rather than just a list of ideas." Every staff member could articulate their role in improvement and demonstrate evidence of it, offering a model other services would benefit from adopting.

Safeguarding, staff roles and responsibilities and equity were the three priorities the whole team identified for their improvement plan, and the work around these was layered and visible from the children through to staff, managers and providers. This showed an improvement approach that was collaborative, consistent and sustained across all levels. The team consistently looked inwards, outwards and forwards. For example, learning from gaps identified on site, as well as from other sites, had continually strengthened safeguarding practice. New systems such as timed headcounts, independent staff and child sign-in/out procedures, proportionate boundary measures and dynamic risk assessments were used daily and reliably. Children contributed meaningfully by identifying hazards, sharing findings and exploring solutions. This meant safeguarding had moved beyond compliance into a shared culture of awareness and responsibility. Weekly oversight audits monitored deployment, transitions, sign-in/out and children's participation, with actions recorded and revisited, ensuring safeguards were reliable and continually strengthened.

Clarity around staff roles and responsibilities had a noticeable, positive impact on daily practice. Staff described clear leadership of areas throughout the day ensuring smooth routines which allowed for the

team to support one another flexibly and confidently. This meant experiences and routines were consistently well led, even during staff changes. Learning audits, mentoring conversations and weekly feedback sheets to the head of centre reinforced this consistency. This was outstanding because improvements held despite staff movement; systems worked regardless of who was present.

The priority on wellbeing, inclusion and equity was also clearly embedded. Children had detailed and responsive personal plans and wellbeing diaries that were reviewed with families over time and acted upon. Staff spoke confidently about children's needs and strategies and worked closely with families. Families described communication as strong and staff as being "invaluable." Many described them as "like family", showing that relationships, communication and inclusion were central to daily practice.

Staff development and induction were robust and meaningful. Induction was a process and followed national guidance, but carefully adapted for the unique forest experience. This meant new staff understood both the procedures and the thinking and practice behind the approach from the start. Mentoring was purposeful and flexible. Training logs and audits showed reflection on scenarios such as risky play and child protection, and this learning strengthened practice. Staff confidence increased quickly and consistently and was another layer of inputs and reflection coming from effective self-evaluation linked to improvement priorities.

Leadership was values driven, coherent and improvement focused. The vision shaped daily life with every member owning improvement. They contributed to wider community capacity building, with colleges, high schools and childminders visiting for training, including fire practice. This demonstrated the influence and leadership of the service beyond its own boundaries. Leaders had clear sustainability plans in place to protect, improve and future proof the model. We considered this sector leading because leadership was collaborative, clearly evidenced at all levels and resulted in consistent, high-quality experiences for all children.

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

### Quality indicator: Children experience high quality spaces

We found significant strengths in aspects of the care provided and how these supported positive outcomes for children/people, therefore we evaluated this key question as very good.

Children benefitted from an environment that supported them to become confident, capable and environmentally aware learners. Spaces were adventurous, safe and thoughtfully curated, with every element designed to meet children's needs, interests and ideas. The environment changed throughout the day in response to how children used it, showing them that the space belonged to them and existed because of them. This sense of ownership encouraged children to protect and respect it. Spaces were rich in opportunity, inviting and flexible, allowing children to choose when to be active, climb trees, tell stories and when to rest using hammocks, quiet corners and cosy nooks. Their connection to the place was evident in powerful moments, such as when they protected emerging daffodils with yellow painted stones.

Children were safe because safeguarding and risk management were robust, dynamic and child-centred. Morning risk assessments were detailed and systematic, and children led their own dynamic assessments later in the day. Children had developed systems with adults that were deeply embedded. They independently identified hazards such as slippery logs and low branches, checked boundary markers, placed SIMOA (Safe, Inspect, Monitor, Observe, Act, Care Inspectorate 2021) safety signs where needed and recorded their findings. They also worked out what was safe to pick up, such as sticks or stones, and what should be

left alone, such as mushrooms or some berries. This showed genuine ownership of the environment and an understanding that safety was a shared responsibility. Families were included in this work through SIMOA sessions, which built shared understanding and trust. One parent said, "My child never runs off now. Staff have really worked on the boundaries," showing clear impact.

Children had access to a rich and unique local environment, and the way the team used it was very good. Staff responded directly to children's interests: going onto the bridge to look down into the water when a child wondered what it would be like, visiting the pond regularly to explore frogs and habitats, using the local library, and taking children seal watching along the shore. Walks involved real life terrain challenges such as steps, slopes and roads, which staff practised with children to build safety, agility and confidence. Local festivals and traditions were naturally woven into learning. Put together, these were not incidental experiences; they were memorable, authentic and meaningful, helping children understand themselves as part of their community and environment. As families told us: "It fosters a love of nature and confidence in adventure" and "The outdoors provision is invaluable to my child's development in all areas."

Infection prevention and physical care were well considered, despite some real-world challenges such as no running water, which never impacted on children's experiences. Safe storage of cleaning equipment, multiple handwashing stations, the replenishing of hot water throughout the day, strict monitoring of food temperatures and daily removal of waste balanced safety with children's independence and dignity. Some of these also encouraged learning around precious resources such as water. Families, children and staff alike were highly invested in the space and described a strong sense of community protection around the site. One told us, "I'm beyond grateful for the opportunity to have my kid in forest so thank you for this space, it's magic!"

## Children play and learn 6 - Excellent

### Quality indicator: Playing, learning and developing

We evaluated this key question as excellent where performance was sector leading with outstandingly high outcomes for children.

Children were learning at an exceptional level because play was child led, inquiry rich and rights based, with adults who knew exactly when to step in to extend thinking. Children led rich learning and their ideas were taken seriously and developed into sustained investigations with clear progression. A strong example was a scientific inquiry that emerged after a story where a child asked, "What is a filter?" Staff facilitated a whole exploration: children designed and built their own filtration systems using chosen and suggested resources; they predicted outcomes, compared flow rates, refined designs and explained their thinking to peers as more children joined. Adults used well-judged questions to stretch ideas without directing them. This was sector leading because the depth, fascination, independence and quality of inquiry were exceptional.

Learning was consistently creative, challenging and authentic. Children's interest in birds led them to build a bird hide and develop real skill in identifying species by features and, for some, by song. Parents told us children named species at home and taught the family how to identify birds. Staff extended this naturally into numeracy, literacy and problem solving through tallying, storytelling and mark making with feathers, with further problem solving opportunities when the paint was too thick. Inventive play with guttering and planks developed into explorations of speed, gravity and cause and effect, enriched by imaginative scenarios such as avoiding "lava." Similarly, a concerned question from one child about an empty snail shell grew into experiential learning about habitats, food chains and care for living things.

Children's interests were genuinely valued. When one child became fascinated by knots, staff learned more complex knots themselves and worked with the children to create a functional pulley system. Children proudly used it to, "deliver post to Darth Vader's house." This demonstrated adults valuing their own learning opportunities alongside children and respect for their ideas as the starting point for meaningful learning.

Risk benefit play strengthened children's resilience and agency. A child's wish for a zip line became a collaborative project where staff first sought specialist advice and training. It was then led by the child: they identified suitable trees, tested ropes and selected the safest stick. The child led key decisions, undertook risk assessments all facilitated by skilful staff. This was sector leading because risk was used to deepen learning rather than limit it, resulting in confidence, problem solving and joy.

Support and challenge were tailored to each child. Staff used observations, progress records and planned reviews with families to identify that many children were learning beyond expected levels. Leaders responded by introducing the Junior Forester Award as the next stage in progression, offering levels of challenge and experiential learning rarely found in early years settings. This extended children's development in woodland management, habitats, identification and stewardship and demonstrated forward thinking, ambitious practice.

Children's learning and values extended beyond the setting. Parents described powerful outcomes: "It transformed my child... gave them confidence and set them up for school," and "My child now identifies trees and birdsong... they teach me the trees by leaf shape." Others described ethical choices at home: "I now have to save spiders... same with any plants because they 'are a living thing'," and "My children have stopped other people picking daffodils... Litter is a huge issue for them." These comments evidenced deep respect for living things, environmental responsibility and the confidence to challenge others which are important skills for future global citizens.

Planning and assessment were driving learning forward. Observations, responsive notes and fortnightly evaluations linked directly to children's individual focused learning priorities. Staff used a robust range of systems including milestone tracking, parent consultation evidence and the unique 'Forest Skills' framework to show progression over time. Children's planning books linked ideas, next steps and visible learning, such as the filtration inquiry. Children asked questions, solved problems, took thoughtful risks, cared for the natural world and exceeded expectations with joy. One parent summed this up, saying, "Day to day they read stories, play with puppets, make obstacle courses, climb trees, make fires, make mud soup, paint... what a childhood!"

## Children are supported to achieve 5 - Very Good

### Quality indicator: Nurturing care and support

We found significant strengths in aspects of the care provided and how these supported positive outcomes for children/people, therefore we evaluated this key question as very good.

Children experienced deeply nurturing care from adults who knew them exceptionally well. Nurture was fully embedded in the culture of the service and evident in every interaction and routine. Staff responded sensitively to children's cues and used a learning approach to support them, creating calm, predictable routines that helped children feel safe. As a result, children were settled, confident and thriving. Families recognised this, describing staff as "endlessly caring, enthusiastic and understanding," and spoke about noticeable growth in their children's confidence and wellbeing.

Children's personal care was delivered with dignity and respect, and staff celebrated individual achievements. Health, dietary and medical needs were well supported, with shared routines between home and the setting helping children feel secure. Staff used 'crib sheets' to ensure everyone had quick access to key information, enabling consistency of care across the team and giving newer staff confidence in meeting children's needs.

Relationships with families were a major strength. One parent shared, "Staff taught me about self-regulation... I can now use these strategies at home," highlighting strong partnership working and support that extended beyond the setting. Another family described the team as, "Amazing... they really listen to me and my children, and they always take action," reflecting high levels of trust and confidence.

Staff were skilled in supporting children to recognise and respond to their physical and emotional needs. For example, they helped children tune in to "which parts of their body felt unhappy" when they were cold, an important consideration in an outdoor environment. This encouraged children to understand their feelings and what they needed, giving them foundational skills in managing their emotions. These consistent, thoughtful approaches strengthened children's confidence and sense of agency.

Children moved smoothly through their day because routines were predictable and well understood. Transitions were calm and supported by cues such as song signifiers, which gave children reassurance and a sense of control. Staff used inclusive approaches such as signing to support children's communication, with training planned so this could be embedded further.

Mealtimes, another key area of improvement, were now warm and sociable. Children prepared food, made choices and managed their own dishes, and families noticed this independence at home, with children taking greater responsibility for small tasks. Transitions into the setting were described by families as, "Attentive, smooth, enjoyable and loving," and many commented on significant development in their children within the first few months. Staff had also begun early planning with local schools to ensure larger transitions were considered in a sensitive, coordinated way.

Children presented with high levels of emotional security. They were confident, empathetic and able to resolve small disputes independently. At lunch, two children remarked, "We'll be friends forever," showing deep connection and belonging. Families also spoke about improved wellbeing, saying "Forest is very special... fewer illnesses, exponential growth in confidence, respectful and caring, more resilient to scrapes, bumps and weather." Another described the setting as, "A magical place."

Identity, culture and belonging were respected and celebrated. Families shared traditions from home, which staff integrated naturally into daily experiences. Food practices were inclusive and thoughtful, ensuring children's values and preferences were recognised. One family told us that when aspects of their home culture were acknowledged in the setting, their child became more interested in exploring their heritage at home, which strengthened their sense of pride and belonging.

Personal plans were reviewed regularly, and strategies were used consistently and calmly in practice. Carefully designed safe spaces and individual planning books were used effectively and created with the child, ensuring support was predictable and well matched to their needs. Detailed planning around wellbeing and individual needs were implemented and reviewed for impact. While approaches were very effective, the introduction of visual supports could add an additional layer and support smoother transitions to school. One parent summed this up, saying it is, "A unique environment with strong relationships and a place where we know our child is safe, well cared for, learning and having fun!"

## Complaints

There have been no complaints upheld since the last inspection. Details of any older upheld complaints are published at [www.careinspectorate.com](http://www.careinspectorate.com).

Detailed evaluations

Leadership	6 - Excellent
Leadership and management of staff and resources	6 - Excellent
Children thrive and develop in quality spaces	5 - Very Good
Children experience high quality spaces	5 - Very Good
Children play and learn	6 - Excellent
Playing, learning and developing	6 - Excellent
Children are supported to achieve	5 - Very Good
Nurturing care and support	5 - Very Good

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