

Early Years Insights Report

September 2024 to June 2025



Education and
Training Inspectorate
Empowering Improvement

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Introduction

This report brings together system-level insights from two complementary sources of evidence from the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI):

- 47 ETI inspections across pre-school education settings, which includes statutory nursery schools, voluntary and community pre-schools, integrated provision, and Irish-medium (naíscoil) settings; and
- the ETI evaluation of Sure Start's Developmental Programme for 2 to 3-year-old children.

Together, these sources contribute to a phase-wide understanding of the quality of pre-school education, the effectiveness of early intervention during early childhood, and the importance of early years education and wider provision in securing, extending and sustaining children's early developmental progress.

The report does not replace the inspection findings reported for the individual pre-school education providers or the Sure Start evaluation. Instead, it synthesises evidence to support system-level understanding and improvement across the early years continuum.

Across all providers, evidence from inspection was also collated from district or specialist visits, a small number of progress visits and progress inspections.

The findings reflect evidence gathered through inspection activity under the ETI Empowering Improvement Framework (2024) and are intended to:

- identify strengths and areas for development across the phase;
- highlight emerging and persistent patterns in practice; and
- inform leadership decisions, professional learning and improvement planning.

Policy Context

The Pre-school Education Programme

The Pre-School Education Programme (PSEP) is a core element of the Department of Education's (DE) early years policy. It aims to provide one year of high-quality pre-school education for every child whose parents wish to access a funded place in the year before their child begins compulsory schooling. The programme, while set out in statute, is non-compulsory. Participation levels are consistently high, with around 93% of parents applying for and accepting a funded place each year.

The PSEP is designed as a partnership between the statutory (nursery schools and nursery units within primary schools) and non-statutory pre-school sectors. As outlined in DE [guidance](#) for the PSEP, funded non-statutory pre-school education provision is a significant element of pre-school education, with approximately a third of funded pre-school education places delivered by non-statutory providers. Both sectors follow the same [Curricular Guidance for Pre-School Education](#) and both are inspected by ETI on the quality of the education provided, using the [Empowering Improvement Framework](#).

A small number of settings inspected during this period were preparing to participate in the [DE 'Standardisation Programme'](#), which aims to standardise all PSEP provision, over time, to a minimum of 22.5 hours per week (full-time).

Sure Start

[Sure Start](#) is another principal mechanism for delivering early years policy aims, by providing holistic support to children and their families from pregnancy and in the period during early childhood, before pre-school. Sure Start provides targeted, integrated early-intervention in areas of socio-economic disadvantage and to families outside these areas, via outreach. Its purpose is to improve children's developmental outcomes in early childhood, reduce the impact of disadvantage, support families, and strengthen children's readiness for pre-school.

Within Sure Start, the Developmental Programme for 2 to 3 Year Olds (the Programme) supports children in their pre-pre-school year who would benefit from specific targeted support, to strengthen their readiness to learn.

Key findings

- Where leadership and governance are highly effective, settings demonstrate the active implementation of a clear vision and shared purpose. This is underpinned by robust self-evaluation and focused improvement priorities, all directly linked to, and evidenced through, improved outcomes for children.
- Inspection evidence indicates that, across the settings, children are happy, settled and growing in confidence. They respond positively to warm, nurturing relationships with staff, consistent and predictable routines, and inclusive environments that effectively support their emotional development and sustained engagement in learning.
- The most significant and consistent feature of highly effective provision is the quality of adult-child interaction in extending the children's learning.
- Personal, social and emotional development is a strength, observed where planning and assessment are evaluative and closely linked to children's progress.
- A strong focus on language, communication and play-based learning, supports children's holistic development and enjoyment of learning.

- The quality of the learning environment is a key contributor to children's positive engagement with learning, as well-designed indoor and outdoor spaces both support emotional security and actively promote curiosity and confidence through play.
- Well-developed partnerships with parents and the wider community strengthen learning, well-being and continuity of support, and actively engage families in children's learning development.
- Many settings also engage with local communities, clusters and partner services to support professional learning and children's experiences.
- Safeguarding and child protection arrangements are effective and aligned with statutory guidance, ensuring children's safety, welfare and well-being are appropriately prioritised.

A shared vision unites all stakeholders to achieve common goals

Most pre-school education settings have taken the opportunity to revisit their vision, to ensure it remains relevant to their context and meaningful for all stakeholders. Committed and knowledgeable governors and management committees play an active role in their settings. They understand and support the vision, and use their skills, experience and community connections effectively to help identify clear priorities for improvement. This promotes a culture of shared ownership and collective responsibility, supporting co-ordinated action towards agreed goals.

The active contribution of parents and the wider community to the development and enactment of the vision, provides a clearer direction for pre-school education settings. It strengthens relationships and promotes collaborative learning environments in which all stakeholders share a commitment to continuous improvement for the benefit of children. Strong alignment between vision, practice and relationships is evident in settings whose practice is effective.

Staff across Sure Start projects are committed to the Sure Start vision of "giving every child the best possible start in life". Delivering this vision is fundamental to strategic planning and decision-making within projects. The vision is shared and embedded well in daily practice through a clear emphasis on early intervention and a holistic approach that integrates play-based learning, health, child development and family support.

Strategic and effective self-evaluation is promoting continuous improvement

A clear commitment to self-evaluation and continuous improvement is evident in most of the settings inspected. Most settings have long-term and medium-term planning in place which is underpinned by high expectations for each child's learning and development. Development plans and associated action plans have clearly defined priorities that are closely aligned to the vision and are reviewed regularly. Collaborative and supportive working environments are evident where staff: work together to share ideas and expertise; reflect regularly on practice; identify areas for development; and implement strategies to enhance the quality of provision. In just over one-half of settings, rigorous self-evaluation is embedded and highly effective.

Strategic alignment of professional learning and development, with priorities identified in development plans, is key to supporting improvement. In settings where professional development is prioritised and well planned, staff report feeling empowered, confident and well equipped to meet the diverse needs of all children. In a small number of settings, a clear and targeted focus on professional learning in speech, language and communication has strengthened staff knowledge and practice, leading to improved outcomes for children experiencing speech, language and communication difficulties.

Most of the Sure Start projects involved in the evaluation have appropriate strategic and annual business plans and were at an early stage of reviewing the effectiveness of the Programme. The Programme Support Specialists (PSS) provide an annual report to DE which details quantitative and qualitative data in relation to delivery. In order to improve practice, findings from this analysis need to be consistently implemented to inform Programme delivery and used to identify and plan professional learning and development priorities.

Meaningful parental engagement and strong community partnerships realise the vision and create vibrant communities of learning

Across most settings, there are well-established partnerships with parents, alongside productive links with the wider community. These include local schools and businesses, health professionals, and community and charitable organisations, which provide additional and timely support to children and families when required.

These partnerships contribute to strong, connected communities of learning and are a defining feature of highly effective provision. Staff use these relationships purposefully to enrich children's learning experiences, strengthen continuity of support and develop children's understanding and knowledge of their local community and the world around them.

Settings have established meaningful and collaborative relationships with parents and provide regular updates on their child's progress. The use of DE-funded initiatives such as the '[Getting Ready to Learn Programme](#)' provides valuable opportunities for parents to participate directly in and learn more about strategies which are supporting their child's learning and development. Home learning is most effective where settings actively support and guide parents to reinforce learning at home. Inspection evidence shows that when staff provide practical strategies, modelling and regular communication, parents are better equipped to support their children's learning and development. The evidence indicates that well-planned home learning initiatives support stronger partnerships between home and pre-school, improving continuity in children's learning and development.

Settling-in arrangements are effective and child-centred, supporting children to feel safe, secure and confident as they transition into the setting. Staff work sensitively with parents to gather detailed information about children's needs, routines and interests, which helps to establish strong relationships from the outset. As a result, most children settle quickly and engage positively in their learning.

A well-planned and robust induction process remains central to supporting smooth and effective transitions into pre-school for all children. Settings should ensure that induction arrangements balance individual needs with DE guidance to support consistency for children and families across the phase.

In a small number of settings, staff further strengthen transition arrangements by engaging proactively with their local Sure Start project(s). These professional links enable staff to build effectively on children's prior learning and developmental progress, supporting continuity, coherence and positive early learning experiences.

The Sure Start thematic evaluation highlighted the effectiveness of early intervention and support for parents and children. The parents benefit from the stay and play sessions provided which develop their understanding of the purpose of play and their confidence in supporting their child during play experiences. Through access to effective professional learning, staff are providing high-quality play experiences and tailored support for children with complex needs.

All five of the Sure Start projects have established strong relationships with their local pre-school settings. A small number of the Sure Start groups are located in the local primary school and principals are members of the Sure Start management team, which provides the children and parents with a continuum of support in their next stage of education. The Sure Start staff also facilitate visits from the pre-school leaders and nursery school principals to share information and provide the children with opportunities to meet with staff from other pre-school settings.

The creative and high-quality learning environments support and extend the children's curiosity and imagination

A majority of settings have thoughtfully designed and well-resourced learning environments, both indoors and outdoors, that stimulate the children's curiosity and promote their active engagement and participation in learning. The use of natural and authentic resources is developing well the children's investigative and exploratory skills. The effective use of outdoor learning environments provides consistent opportunities for the children's physical development and sensory experiences. In settings where the practice is most effective, staff interact purposefully with the children to enhance learning by promoting the children's independence, and develop further their thinking and problem-solving skills.

In the Irish-medium pre-school settings inspected, language development is embedded across all areas of play and the immersive environments provide children with opportunities to hear and use the language naturally throughout the day during play, transitions and through stories and rhymes.

Across the Sure Start projects, creative, stimulating and high-quality learning environments are a clear strength of the Programme, which are used well by the staff to support and extend the children's curiosity, exploration and imagination.

The outdoor areas in almost all of the settings are small but proportionate to the number of children attending the sessions. The staff have adapted the areas to provide the children with a rich variety of sensory and exploratory activities which motivate the children to participate in collaborative, creative and independent play.

An effective approach to planning, delivery and professional reflection supports children to make good progress

A majority of pre-school settings have implemented a robust and effective cycle of planning, teaching, observation, and assessment to support the children's learning and monitor their progress and inform practice. Detailed observations and assessments, supported by digital tools in some settings, inform very effectively the future planning and learning for each child. In the more effective practice, the planning, teaching and assessment are appropriately tailored to meet the children's individual needs and interests, recognising the diversity of learning styles and developmental stages.

The settings inspected which are preparing to introduce standardisation welcome the extended entitlement for children. Those offering wraparound care report that they are well prepared for the associated provision of meals. In preparation for standardisation, a key priority for settings is the continued development of planning and provision to ensure that the additional time is used effectively to extend and enrich children's learning opportunities and experiences across the curriculum.

In the more effective practice, the planning for learning, teaching and assessment supports the children to make good progress across all areas of the pre-school curriculum. The children's physical, social and emotional well-being continues to be prioritised, through a range of supportive strategies, including mindfulness sessions, calm areas and sensory circuits. These support strategies enable the children to learn and make progress across the curriculum. The integration of early mathematical language into play is a strength in most settings with children exploring shape and size, measure and sort, and recognising number. The children also develop creativity and imagination through the use of natural resources, painting, music-making, role-play and other creative activities.

The staff use a number of effective strategies to support the development of the children's language and communication skills. These include, for example, the staff's use of: skilful interactions with the children in which they model language; open-ended questions to extend the children's critical thinking; books and stories which are integrated into all play areas; home learning packs and lending libraries; and Makaton to further support the children's communication skills. In the more effective practice, learning environments are literacy-rich with readily available books and writing materials across all areas of play, which encourages children to access books independently and develop their early mark-making skills. Consequently, the children in these settings show an enjoyment of stories and are developing their early writing skills.

In Sure Start, planning for, and implementation of, high-quality early years practice provides a sufficient framework for the Programme. Planning for learning is appropriately structured to support the children's holistic growth across the key areas of communication and language, physical development, social and emotional development, and early learning. Across the projects, effective planning to improve children's progress is characterised by specific strategies for individual children, robust evaluations and appropriate changes to the provision.

A key strength of the Programme is a focus on the children's speech and language development and the evident improvement in the children's language and communication skills through the use of a speech and language toolkit. Staff value the role of the speech and language therapist to provide them with strategies to support the children with their speech and language needs. There are also very good, planned opportunities for the children to develop their gross and fine motor skills and their spatial awareness.

Inclusive learning opportunities enable all children to experience success

A majority of the settings are committed to creating welcoming, equitable and inclusive learning environments where there are high expectations and all of the children feel valued, respected, and are supported to achieve. Inspectors consistently highlight inclusive leadership, with settings demonstrating a clear and sustained commitment to equality, diversity, and ensuring all children and families are able to participate fully. The staff use a variety of strategies such as visual cues, sensory spaces, communication aids, structured language programmes and small group sessions, to respond to children's diverse learning needs. A small number of settings have been proactive in sourcing additional funding through initiatives to provide additional adult support for children with special educational needs (SEN).

Early intervention is key and in many of the settings it involves prompt identification of the children's needs, interventions by the staff, and timely liaison with external agencies when further support is required. Communication with parents and external professionals such as the Education Authority's (EA) SEN Early Years Inclusion Service, and the Health and Social Care Trust (HSCT) health visitor is facilitated through regular meetings and reviews to discuss each child's progress. In the more effective practice, the children's individual education plans/personal learning plans (IEPs/PLPs) provide specific, detailed and monitored targets, with clear support strategies and include the views of parents. Professional learning opportunities for the staff are also regular and tailored to the children's needs.

In the 16 Sure Start settings visited, the children with additional needs benefit from tailored strategies such as Makaton to support children who are non-verbal, in addition to small group support and calm structured environments. In three of the five Sure Start projects, a bespoke programme of support was in place for approximately six children with more complex and diverse learning needs. These programmes are at varying stages of development.

Child protection

During this period, the majority of settings demonstrated safeguarding arrangements that align with current DE statutory guidance. A small number of settings required a child protection progress inspection due to policies which did not align sufficiently with the guidance, and/or the staff or management committee/governor training had lapsed and was outside the required timeframes. All of these settings had a six-week child protection progress inspection, by which time the areas requiring action had been addressed, with some settings receiving support provided by the EA Child Protection Support Service.

At the time of the evaluation, the evidence provided by all of the Sure Start projects demonstrates that the arrangements for child protection align with the current statutory guidance.

Key challenges

The strengths evident across pre-school education settings and the Sure Start projects are significant, however, inspection and evaluation also identify a number of ongoing and systemic challenges. The issues outlined below require co-ordinated action at both setting and system level to ensure all children can benefit fully from high-quality early years provision.

Recruitment, retention and funding pressures continue to impact early years education settings and programmes

Recruitment and retention of staff remain significant challenges across the Early Years sector. Boards of Governors, management committees, principals and leaders of pre-school education settings frequently express concern and frustration about staffing challenges and the associated impact on the continuity of the children's learning experiences and the additional work for existing staff. Pay and conditions, as well as staff turnover, continue to contribute to these difficulties. In a small number of settings where there has been a complete change in staffing, leaders are appropriately focusing on rebuilding capacity through clear, collegial processes and the development of strong professional relationships. Staff value the prioritisation of health and well-being within development planning.

A number of voluntary and private providers highlight uncertainty in financial planning, linked to the EA's annual Pupil Allocation Numbers process for non-statutory settings participating in the PSEP. Leaders report that this uncertainty can limit longer-term staffing decisions and retention. These challenges are compounded by wider demographic trends, including declining birth rates, which are recognised across all school phases.

During the Sure Start thematic evaluation, staffing challenges were also found to impact adversely on programme delivery. The project managers and the Department of Health's Strategic Planning and Policy Group (SPPG) report that the short-term nature of Sure Start funding, alongside uncertainty over confirmation at the start of each financial year, is constraining effective long-term planning and adversely affecting workforce stability, including the recruitment and retention of staff.

A system approach is required to meet the needs of children with Special Educational Needs

Staff report ongoing challenges in responding to children presenting with additional and special educational needs, particularly in relation to speech, language and communication. This is evident across the pre-school education phase.

Around 40% of pre-school education settings inspected during this period experienced challenges in meeting the increasing level of need effectively. Challenges include establishing robust processes for identifying needs and developing IEPs/PLPs with clear targets and strategies, and implementing support consistently. In a small number of settings, the process of early identification, support and intervention are at an early stage of development.

A small number of settings, in agreement with the parents, provide reduced hours of attendance for some children who are undergoing statutory assessment for a statement of SEN. This measure is introduced where children with complex learning and/or behaviour needs, whose statement of SEN is pending, do not yet have additional adult support. These arrangements should be short-term, closely monitored and kept under regular review with the parents.

Supporting full and regular attendance ensures that children benefit from the complete planned pre-school education curriculum. The expansion of the [Pre-School Inclusion Fund](#) by DE in November 2025 provides a mechanism to support staff to meet the diverse needs of children in their classes more effectively, appoint additional staff and enable the children to attend daily.

All settings should set out clearly the expectations and processes to monitor the children's attendance within their attendance policy. A co-ordinated system-level response by DE and EA is also required to monitor more effectively the attendance patterns of non-compulsory school age children in pre-school education.

In the Sure Start Development Programme, while practice at project level is strong, programme-level evaluation and monitoring of outcomes, particularly for children with SEN, requires further development to support longer-term impact and improvement planning. In some projects, bespoke support programmes are in place for children with more complex needs and are at varying stages of development. As these bespoke programmes of support continue to develop, staff across all Sure Start projects require consistent access to high-quality professional learning to strengthen practice in supporting children with complex needs and to evaluate the impact of earlier identification and intervention.

Planning for learning is key to progression

The medium-term planning for outdoor learning requires consistent review to enable the children to participate in investigative play, problem-solve, and engage in exploratory play across all pre-school education curriculum areas. In a small number of settings, the outdoor learning environment requires development to include the provision of a wider range of natural and authentic resources to maximise the children's learning opportunities.

Planning in some settings is overly focused on activities rather than the development of the children's specific skills and learning outcomes, informed by the needs and interests of the children. In a small number of settings, the use of circle time is overly adult-led and too formal for pre-school education which prioritises play-based learning. In addition, not all settings consistently plan and implement opportunities to

develop the children's language and communication skills across all areas of the pre-school curriculum. Consequently, the children do not extend their vocabulary or develop their awareness of early mathematical language as well as they should. Planning for the integration of digital skills across the curriculum is also under-developed and results in too few opportunities for the children to use digital tools to enhance their learning and understanding of the world around them.

Building capacity for effective self-evaluation and improvement

In a significant minority of settings, processes for self-evaluation require ongoing monitoring and review to inform meaningful improvements. Action plans should include targets that specify the actions, and associated timescales for implementation, which are needed to improve provision, with subsequent monitoring and evaluation of impact. A small number of settings are in the early stages of developing and implementing new or revised planning and self-evaluation approaches which will require ongoing monitoring to ascertain their effectiveness.

The Sure Start thematic evaluation also identified a need for continued regional co-ordination between Sure Start project managers, DE and SPPG including robust evaluation, partnership working with external agencies, and systems to monitor long-term outcomes.

Closer alignment is required at practice and policy level

Many of the pre-school education settings report that opportunities for closer working between the Departments of Health and Education are required to meet more effectively the needs of all of the children. For example, the 3+ review is a joint Health-Education initiative and is intended to support the sharing of information between the parent, school and HSCT to support early identification of needs, and where necessary, appropriate referral to support services. However, a small number of settings report that despite the policy intention, information is often not shared with the school.

The annual inspection of PSEP providers by the local HSCT may on occasion overlap with an ETI pre-school inspection. In such instances, the relationship and alignment between the two inspection processes are not always clear or well understood by staff.

In some cases the children's transition from Sure Start to pre-school is not as effective as it could be. There is evidence from inspection that some pre-school settings are not aware of and are not building effectively on the children's prior learning from the Developmental Programme.

In three out of the five Sure Start projects visited, the child protection policy required further review to include signs and symptoms of domestic violence and to align better to the DE guidance. Given the strong relationships that are fostered between the Sure Start staff and families, they are well placed to provide support and referral when required. Safeguarding effectiveness in this area depends on the clarity and coherence of system-level guidance.

The Sure Start evaluation recommended stronger collaboration and more effective strategic planning between Health and Education, the SPPG, childcare partnership managers, and governance structures to address workforce challenges and secure consistent, high-quality delivery of play-based learning programmes.

Non-target age children enrolled within pre-school settings require increased support

In a significant minority of pre-school settings, children who are younger than pre-school age are enrolled. While the settings remain committed to supporting families within their local community, the enrolment of children who are under the target age requires the delivery of a developmentally appropriate programme and wider resourcing to meet their needs. This places additional demands on the staff, such as an increased requirement for intimate care which can impact the staff-child ratio and the consistent implementation of the pre-school education curriculum.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the evidence gathered from inspections, visits and thematic evaluations demonstrates that there is much to commend within pre-school education provision and targeted developmental programmes. Across the sector, a strong shared vision and meaningful partnerships with parents and communities are contributing positively to the children's early learning experiences. Many settings are delivering high-quality, play-based learning within creative environments that nurture children's curiosity and well-being.

At the same time, persistent challenges remain such as staff retention and recruitment. Priorities to empower improvement across early years provision include:

- strengthening planning, observation and assessment to ensure clear progression;
- embedding robust, evidence-based self-evaluation and improvement planning; and
- securing effective SEN identification, support and monitoring.

Across the pre-school education sector and at the earlier intervention stage in Sure Start programmes, staff demonstrate a strong collective commitment to collaboration and to the continued development of vibrant communities of learning that place children's well-being, learning and potential at the centre of provision. To further develop and enhance high-quality early years provision, coherent and sustained alignment between policy, funding and workforce development is needed.

The development of the Early Learning and Childcare Strategy represents a positive and timely opportunity to build on the recognised strengths of the early years sector. It acknowledges the strong commitment, expertise and practice already evident across early years provision, while providing a clearer framework to enable and support staff in addressing ongoing and emerging challenges, particularly in relation to special educational needs and workforce sustainability.

Appendix: Quantitative Terms

In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75% - 90%
A majority	-	50% - 74%
A significant minority	-	30% - 49%
A minority	-	10% - 29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10%

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