

Inspection of Little Acorns

Hurworth Primary School, Westfield Drive, Hurworth, DARLINGTON, County Durham DL2 2ET

Inspection date: 26 September 2025

Overall effectiveness	Outstanding
The quality of education	Outstanding
Behaviour and attitudes	Outstanding
Personal development	Outstanding
Leadership and management	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Good

What is it like to attend this early years setting?

The provision is outstanding

This nursery offers a nurturing environment where children thrive. Staff prioritise supportive relationships, especially for children new to the setting. They create a calm and secure atmosphere where children feel safe, valued and ready to learn. Carefully planned grouping of children ensures that high-quality education continues while staff sensitively support those settling in.

The curriculum is ambitious, child-led and rooted in the highest expectations for language and emotional development. Staff promote deep engagement through carefully chosen experiences that reflect children's interests and developmental needs. They plan activities precisely, ensuring each one supports specific learning goals. Older children build houses at the craft table, developing creativity, collaboration and expressive language. Younger children mix 'potions', exploring sensory materials and extending vocabulary through imaginative play. Staff enrich the curriculum with real-world activities that build on children's experiences and deepen their understanding of community. Children visit the local café for drinks and snacks and pick apples in the nearby orchard. These outings foster a strong sense of belonging and help children to connect learning to the world around them.

Children behave exceptionally well. They cooperate, follow routines and show high levels of emotional security. Staff model respectful interactions and tailor support to individual needs, ensuring every child is included, challenged and celebrated.

What does the early years setting do well and what does it need to do better?

- Teaching is sharply focused. Staff use their deep knowledge of children to plan responsively and stretch learning. They select groups with care, ensuring quieter children access language-rich experiences and more able children encounter challenge. The 'Ladybird Group' exemplifies this approach, where older two-year-olds are supported to lead play, solve problems and take responsibility.
- Staff use precise teaching strategies to build vocabulary, extend thinking and promote literacy. Activities are carefully sequenced to support progression. For example, staff introduce learning through shared stories, then revisit key concepts through role play, small-group discussions and creative tasks. Children learn to recall, predict and explain with increasing confidence. They are remarkably high achievers who remember their learning.
- Children with special educational needs and/or disabilities, and those who speak English as an additional language, receive targeted support that helps them thrive. Staff use tailored strategies to build confidence and encourage interactions. They plan interventions for all children, not just those with identified needs, and track progress closely. This helps to ensure that every child is supported to make the best possible progress.

- Behaviours in this nursery are remarkably positive. Children follow staff's guidance diligently during routines and transitions. For example, even the youngest children walk calmly and quietly through school to the lunch hall. Staff reinforce expectations through warm reminders and consistent modelling. Children listen attentively, take turns and contribute confidently during group times. They show high levels of emotional security and respect for others.
- Emotional well-being and personal development are central to staff's approach. They help children to recognise, name and manage their feelings. Children feel safe to express themselves. They show care towards others and build friendships. Staff listen to children, who know their feelings matter. Children show increasing confidence. For example, a child proudly gives the inspector a 'fist bump' and 'elbow bump' to celebrate how well they lined up for outdoor play.
- Parents speak with warmth and confidence about the care their children receive. Staff maintain open, honest communication and involve families in every step of their child's journey. They share strategies and celebrate progress. Parents feel listened to and valued. This strong partnership supports consistency between home and the nursery, helping children to settle quickly, feel secure and make sustained progress.
- Staff ensure that every child can take part in nursery life, adapting activities so all children feel included. Staff remove barriers to learning with care and creativity. For example, they modify celebrations, sports races and cycling lessons to ensure that all children are involved seamlessly. This inclusive approach reflects the nursery's commitment to supporting and celebrating the uniqueness of every child.
- In-depth, frequent evaluation helps to continuously strengthen practice. Staff reflect daily and refine teaching with intent. Leaders provide purposeful supervision and targeted professional development for staff. They link with schools to share strategies that raise aspirations, ensure continuity and depth in learning, and to give children a strong foundation for the future. This rigour contributes to the exceptional quality of education and outstanding outcomes for children.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

There is an open and positive culture around safeguarding that puts children's interests first.

Setting details

Unique reference number	EY438010
Local authority	Darlington
Inspection number	10408036
Type of provision	Childcare on non-domestic premises
Registers	Early Years Register, Compulsory Childcare Register, Voluntary Childcare Register
Day care type	Full day care
Age range of children at time of inspection	2 to 4
Total number of places	36
Number of children on roll	44
Name of registered person	Baker, Elizabeth Jane
Registered person unique reference number	RP903246
Telephone number	07896318103
Date of previous inspection	23 January 2020

Information about this early years setting

Little Acorns registered in 2011 and is located within Hurworth Primary School in Darlington. The nursery employs 12 members of childcare staff, who all hold appropriate early years qualifications at level 3 or above, including the manager and two other members of childcare staff who hold qualified teacher status. The nursery operates Monday to Friday for 48 weeks of the year and closes on bank holidays. Opening hours are from 8am to 6pm. The nursery offers government funded childcare and receives additional funding for disadvantaged children.

Information about this inspection

Inspector
Clare Wilkins

Inspection activities

- The inspector viewed the provision and discussed the safety and suitability of the premises.
- The manager and inspector completed a learning walk together of all areas of the nursery and discussed the early years curriculum.
- The inspector observed the quality of education being provided, indoors and outdoors, and assessed the impact that this was having on children's learning.
- A senior member of staff and the inspector observed and evaluated an activity.
- The inspector spoke to staff and children at appropriate times during the inspection.
- The leadership team met with the inspector to discuss leadership and management of the nursery.
- The inspector looked at relevant documents, including evidence of the suitability checks carried out on staff.
- Parents met with the inspector to share their views about the nursery.

We carried out this inspection under sections 49 and 50 of the Childcare Act 2006 on the quality and standards of provision that is registered on the Early Years Register. The registered person must ensure that this provision complies with the statutory framework for children's learning, development and care, known as the early years foundation stage.

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