

# Early Years Inspectorate Regulatory Report

## Pre School

**TUSLA Identifier:** TU2015CE129

**Name of Service:** Stepping Stones Montessori

**Address of Service:** Community Centre, O'Callaghan's Mills, Clare, Co. Clare

**Eircode:** V94 K5DY

**Name of Registered Provider:** Michelle Donnellan Fitzgerald

**Service type:** Sessional

**Date of Inspection:** 13/01/2026

**No of pre-school children:** AM 11 PM N/A

**Address of the Early Years Inspectorate:** Quality and Regulation Directorate  
Tusla Child and Family Agency  
Ennis Primary Care Centre  
Station Road  
Ennis  
County Clare  
V95TY4E

**Inspection undertaken by:** A. McCarthy

**Title:** Early Years Inspector

### Authority to Inspect

The Tusla Early Years Inspectorate carries out inspections of Early Years Services under Section 58(J) of the Child Care Act 1991 (as inserted by Section 92 of the Child and Family Agency Act 2013).

**Conditions if applicable** Not applicable

### Description of service

Stepping Stones Montessori is a sessional service, located on the first floor of the community centre, in the rural village of O'Callaghan's Mills, in County Clare. The programme of care and education is facilitated Monday to Friday from 08:45 to 11:45 for children ranging from three to five years for 38 weeks of the year. The service is facilitated in one care room and in an enclosed outdoor play area to the rear of the building.

### Staffing

On the 13 January 2026 the registered provider assisted by one adult worked directly with the children in attendance. The current registered provider took over the service in 2025. Both adults working directly with the children held an appropriate qualification in Early Childhood Care and Education.

### Methodology

Tusla's Early Years Inspectorate is the independent statutory regulator of early years services in Ireland. The Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 define the duty of a registered provider to ensure the safety and well-being of children and to comply with these regulations. This Act also gives Tusla the authority to assess compliance with the regulations. The purpose of regulation in relation to early years services is to ensure that the care, safety, and well-being of children attending such services is upheld. Inspections of early years services are planned based on the following:

- Previous inspection history
- Any information received in relation to the service

The findings on inspection are based on:

- Information obtained through examination of documentation
- Direct observation
- Discussion with relevant staff

This inspection was unannounced and focused on the area of governance, health, welfare and development of child and safety and premises and facilities. The regulations inspected included:

Regulation 9 – Management and recruitment (1)(a)(b)(2)(a)(b)(c)(d) and (4)

Regulation 11 - Staffing levels (1) (3)

Regulation 19 - Health, welfare and development of child (1)(a)

Regulation 23 - Safeguarding health, safety and welfare of child

Regulation 25 - First aid (1)(a)(b)(4)

Regulation 26- Fire safety measures (1)(a)(b)(4)

Regulation 28- Insurance

Regulation 29 – Premises (e)

Regulation 30- Minimum space requirements (1)(3)

Inspection findings are documented in the inspection report which is first issued in draft format to the service with an opportunity to respond to any findings. The inspectorate reserves the right to edit responses received for reasons including clarity, completeness and compliance with administrative and legal processes. The contents of the report are compiled by the inspectorate body.

## Additional Information

### Immediate Action Notice:

13 January 2026

An Immediate Action Notice was issued under Regulation 9(2)(c). A mandatory Garda vetting disclosure was not available for one adult who was present in the service contrary to the National Vetting Bureau (Children and Vulnerable Persons) Act 2012. A response was received on the 14 January 2026 with interim measures taken by the service to mitigate the risk. The registered provider advised that a copy of the Garda Vetting disclosure would be submitted to the inspectorate once received and assessed.

## Acknowledgments

The inspector wishes to acknowledge the cooperation of the registered provider, the staff member and children who were present on the day of the inspection.

### Part III – Management and Staff

#### Regulation 9 – Management and recruitment

*(1) A registered provider shall ensure that-*

- (a) the service has a designated person in charge and a named person who is able to deputise as required,*
- (b) at all times during the period when the pre-school service is being carried on, the designated person in charge or the named person referred to in subparagraph (a) is on the premises, and*

*(2) A registered provider shall ensure that each employee, unpaid worker and contractor is suitable and competent taking into consideration the nature of the needs of children, including by-*

- (a) consideration of references from the person's past employers, if any, and in particular the most recent employer, if any,*
- (b) consideration of references from reputable sources in the case of a person who has no past employers,*
- (c) consideration of the vetting disclosure received from the National Vetting Bureau of the Garda Síochána in accordance with the Act of 2012 in respect of the person, and*
- (d) ensuring, insofar as is practicable, that where a person has lived in a state other than the State for a period of longer than 6 consecutive months, he or she provides police vetting from the police authorities in that state.*

*(4) A registered provider shall ensure that, without prejudice to the generality of paragraph (2) and subject to paragraphs (5) and (6), each employee working directly with children attending the service holds at least a major award in Early childhood Care and Education at Level 5 on the National Qualifications Framework or a qualification deemed by the Minister to be equivalent.*

#### Compliance Information

(1)(a)

The registered provider was the designated person in charge, and a second adult is available to deputise when required.

(b)

The registered provider was the designated person in charge throughout the inspection.

Two files were available. The findings included the following:

(2)(a)

Three of the four required written and validated references from past employers were available.

- (b)  
Where a past employer reference was not available, one reference was obtained from a source other than a past employer.
- (c)  
Garda vetting disclosures had been obtained for one adult working in the service. The service demonstrated compliance with the Early Years Inspectorate Regulatory Notice requiring services to renew Garda vetting every three years for one adult.
- (d)  
International police vetting was not required. The adults had not lived in another State for a period longer than six months as an adult.
- (4)  
The adults working directly with the children held Early Childhood Care and Education qualifications at Level 7 and Level 8 on the National Framework of Qualifications.

### Non-Compliance Information

- (2)(c)  
A mandatory Garda vetting disclosure was not available in respect of one adult who was present in the service contrary to the National Vetting Bureau (Children and Vulnerable Persons) Act 2012. On the 13 January 2026 an immediate action notice was issued to the registered provider. Details outlined in the additional information section.

### Corrective & Preventive Action submitted by the Registered Provider

The registered provider submitted the following response and submissions:

#### **Corrective and Preventive Action**

- (2)(c)  
Garda vetting has been applied for the adult that required a vetting disclosure. Once received a copy of the Garda vetting disclosure will be submitted to the Inspectorate.
- The registered provider has undertaken training in relation to Garda Vetting.
- The registered provider has contacted the vetting unit to follow up on the vetting disclosure.
- All staff will have garda vetting prior to commencing in the service.
- A response was received in relation to the immediate action notice issued refer to additional information for further information.

#### **Supporting documentation submitted**

- (2)(c)

A copy of the Garda Vetting Application to the vetting has been submitted and confirmation of pending garda vetting.

The service Recruitment Policy.

### Summary Comment

Evidence of an application for one adult's Garda vetting was reviewed however a copy of the complete Garda vetting has not been submitted for this adult to the Early Years Inspectorate to date.

The registered provider is required to furnish the required documentation to the Inspectorate upon receipt.

The noncompliance in relation to Regulation 9 (2)(c) remains outstanding.

### Part III – Management and Staff

#### Regulation 11 - Staffing levels

*(1) Subject to this Regulation, a registered provider shall ensure that there is at all times an adequate number of adults working directly with the children attending the pre-school service.*

*(3) Subject to paragraph (5), a registered provider of a sessional pre-school service shall ensure that at all times the minimum ratio of adults to children specified in column (3) of Part 2 of Schedule 6 opposite a particular reference number specified in column (1) of that Part in respect of the age range of the children specified in column (2) therefore at that reference number is satisfied.*

### Compliance Information

- (1)  
During the inspection, an adequate number of adults worked directly with the children in attendance.
- (3)  
On the 13 January 2026, the ratio of adults caring for children was maintained. Two adults cared for the eleven children attending the service.

### Part V - Care of Child in Pre-school Service

#### Regulation 19 - Health, welfare and development of child

(1) A registered provider shall, in providing a pre-school service, ensure that-

(a) each child's learning, development and well-being is facilitated within the daily life of the pre-school service through the provision of the appropriate activities, interaction, materials and equipment, having regard to the age and stage of development of the child.

#### Compliance Information

(1)(a)

The children's learning, development and well-being was facilitated within the service through the provision of appropriate activities, interactions, materials, and equipment having regard to the age and developmental stage of the children.

#### Basic Needs of Children:

The adults interacted with the children in a kind and respectful manner. The adults listened attentively and conversed with the children at their level and responded promptly to their cues for assistance. Positive behavioural strategies were used during interactions, and the children were offered praise and encouragement. The adults demonstrated an awareness of the children's personal interests, preferences and capabilities. The transitions in the change of activities in the room were facilitated with ease, as the adults notified the children in advance of any changes in the programme of care and learning. The adults rotated in accordance with the children's preferences and for assistance. The children chose their individual activities throughout the session. The adults promoted speech development through open ended discussions, games, song and rhyme.

The children were encouraged to be independent while caring for their belongings, during activities, at mealtime and whilst using the toilet. The children were encouraged and supported to manage their own personal care appropriate to their age and level of development. Parents/Guardians provided the children's lunches. The lunches observed included various types of fruit, vegetable, wraps, sandwiches, crackers and yoghurt. The children sat together and conversed amicably during mealtime. Mealtime was observed to be a relaxed and sociable occasion. The children engaged in open ended play and educational Montessori based activities in the indoor environment. The children transitioned from opened ended, tabletop, play based activities which included sensorial, constructive, manipulative and pretend play, then proceeded to engage in group games, song, rhyme and story time.

### Physical and Material Environment:

The programme of care and education was facilitated in one open plan room. The care room was bright and spacious and was adequately resourced for the age range and stage of development of the children. Designated areas of interest were available and included a home corner, a construction area and a shop. Shelving units accommodated an appropriate range of accessible materials and equipment for the children. A large area accommodated soft furnishings and a bookshelf with a large range of reading materials. This area was accessed by the children intermittently throughout the morning by the children to rest and relax with their peers.

The outdoor play area was located to the rear of the building. This area consisted of a grass surface. The surrounding perimeter was secured by a wall, fencing and gates. A shed was available to store the play equipment. The outdoor play area offered an inviting space for the children to freely explore and engage in activities. The children had access to a slide, climbing frames, a wheelbarrow, a mud kitchen, a musical board, vehicles, large wooden blocks, ribbons, balls and tunnels.

### Part VI – Safety

#### Regulation 23 - Safeguarding health, safety and welfare of child

*A registered provider shall ensure that all reasonable measures are taken to safeguard the health, safety and welfare of a pre-school child attending the service and that the environment of the service is safe.*

### Compliance Information

#### General Safety:

- The entrance and exit to and from the service was secured by a bell operated system to prevent unauthorised persons accessing the service.
- The outdoor play area was secured with fencing and gates to protect the children within.
- The children were supervised at all times during the inspection.
- Cleaning agents were stored in a secured area out of reach of the children.

#### Infection Control:

- The service was maintained in a clean and hygienic condition.
- A cleaning schedule was available demonstrating measures taken to maintain and clean the service.
- The sanitary facilities were adequately equipped with warm running water, liquid soap, hand paper towels and lined, lidded pedal operated bins.

- The children washed their hands at regular intervals during the day. This included after play based activities, after using the toilet and prior to mealtime.

### Administration of Medication:

- Medication was not administered during the inspection. The registered provider stated that the children currently do not require medication to be administered.

### Fire Safety:

- Records of completed monthly fire drills are available in the service.
- The fire exits and routes were clear from obstruction throughout the service.
- The fire assembly point and the fire exit route signage were readily identifiable.

### Outing:

- The registered provider stated that outings are not undertaken by the service.

## Part VI - Safety

### Regulation 25 - First aid

*(1) A registered provider shall ensure that a person trained in first aid for children is, at all times, immediately available to the children attending the pre-school service.*

*(2) A registered provider shall ensure that a suitably equipped first aid box for children-*

*(a) is safely stored in an easily accessible and conspicuous position on the premises, and*

*(b) is available to the children attending the pre-school service at all times.*

### Compliance Information

(1)

An adult working directly with the children held a record of up to date First Aid Responder (FAR) training.

(2)(a)

A suitably equipped first aid box was stored in an accessible and conspicuous position in the care room.

(b)

The first aid box was available in the service for use by the adults in the event of an emergency.

## Part VI - Safety

### Regulation 26 - Fire safety measures

- (1) A registered provider shall ensure that a record in writing is kept of-
- (a) any fire drill that takes place in the premises, and
  - (b) the number, type and maintenance record of fire fighting equipment and smoke alarms in the premises.
- (4) A notice of the procedures to be followed in the event of fire shall be displayed in a conspicuous position in the premises.

#### Compliance Information

(1)(a)

Records of completed monthly fire drills were available. The most recent fire drill took place on the 12 January 2026.

(b)

Up-to-date records of the number, type and maintenance service were available for the firefighting equipment and the smoke alarm system. The most recent service of the firefighting equipment and the smoke alarm system maintenance service took place in November 2025.

(4)

A fire action notice demonstrating the procedures to be followed in the service.

## Part VI – Safety

### Regulation 28 – Insurance

*A registered provider shall ensure that the pre-school service is adequately insured.*

#### Compliance Information

Up to date insurance cover was available for twenty-two children attending the service. The policy is valid until 27 November 2026.

## Part VII - Premises and Space Requirements

### Regulation 29 – Premises

*A registered provider shall ensure that the premises of the service are-*

- (d) cleaned, maintained and repaired, as required, and*
- (e) equipped with adequate and suitable sanitary facilities.*

#### Compliance Information

- (d)  
The service was maintained in clean and hygienic manner. A cleaning schedule was available demonstrating measures taken to maintain the service.
- (e)  
The children had access to a sanitary facility adjacent to the care room. The sanitary facility was appropriately equipped with a child sized toilet and a wash hand basin, warm running water, a liquid soap dispenser, a hand paper towel dispensers and a lidded pedal operated bin. An adult sanitary facility was also available on the ground floor.

## Part VII - Premises and Space Requirements

### Regulation 30 - Minimum space requirements

- (1) Subject to paragraphs (2) to (6), a registered provider shall ensure that adequate clear floor space is available in the premises for the work, play and movement of children attending the pre-school service.*
- (3) A registered provider of a sessional pre-school service or a pre-school service in a drop-in centre shall ensure that a minimum of 1.818 square metres of clear floor space is available for each child attending the service.*

#### Compliance Information

- (1)  
Adequate clear floor space was provided for the children attending the service on 13 January 2026. The service provided a space for the children to freely move and engage in play-based and educational activities.
- (3)  
On the 13 January 2026 adequate space was provided for the children attending the service. The care room measured 27.15 m<sup>2</sup>.